THE LAND: FOUNDING

CHAOS SEEDS: BOOK I

ALERON KONG

The Land: Founding

By

Dr. Aleron Kong

I am who I am only because of the love and time that many people have dedicated to me, and so I dedicate this book to you. First and foremost, I dedicate this book to my mother, Stephanie Hisako Kong. You have taught me much, and more than anything else you have taught me to be strong. I love you.

Table of Contents

THE DARK COURT

PROLOGUE

CHAPTER 1

CHAPTER 2

CHAPTER 3

CHAPTER 4

CHAPTER 5

CHAPTER 6

CHAPTER 7

CHAPTER 8

CHAPTER 9

CHAPTER 10

CHAPTER 11

CHAPTER 12

CHAPTER 13

CHAPTER 14

CHAPTER 15

CHAPTER 16

CHAPTER 17

CHAPTER 18

CHAPTER 19

CHAPTER 20

CHAPTER 21

CHAPTER 22

CHAPTER 23

CHAPTER 24

CHAPTER 25

CHAPTER 26

The Dark Court



The Prince sneered at the back of the throne room. The sycophants and greedy court leeches pleaded their cases to the Dark Queen. Every day, every year, every millennia was exactly the same. Hearing their complaints of needing more power, or their false pride in capturing a few more souls, the Prince tried to summon anger, disdain, or hatred, but all he felt was boredom.

In any other reality, these would be gods, demon lords, or spirit kings. In this exiled pocket of space and time however, they were pathetic! The members of the Dark Court fought each other for the meager scraps of power the Queen doled out, like cubs at her teat!

Though he also lived at her mercy, the Prince would not do so for much longer. Today, he began the plan. Today, he brought the first Earthling to The Land. Today, he was one step closer to escaping this eternal prison! The Universe had long ago exiled all the members of the Dark and Light Court to this small shard of reality. The lock to their prison was the world simply called “The Land.” Despite having vast powers, no being had been able to escape the pocket dimension.

Coming back from his musings, the Prince nodded to the Grand Vizier, who slowly nodded back. The Vizier appeared to have a hunched stature, but his true form was unknowable. He had never been seen out of his dark robes, and the garment completely covered his body. The Vizier was his closest ally, and one of the few Exiles that was older than the Prince. He was not a friend, however. There were no friends in the Dark Court.

Nonetheless, the Vizier had convinced the Prince that all previous attempts to escape had been too small in scope. Why even try to escape the perfect prison? If instead, they could destroy the lock, the pocket dimension that held them prisoner would open, and they would all be free. Most importantly, HE would be free. The conclusion was simple. The Land had to be destroyed. The question

was, how to do it? That was when the Vizier had told him about Earth.

The Earth was a world almost completely devoid of magic. They had no gods to tell them what they should and should not do. It had created a population who committed atrocities on par with the most heinous of the Dark Court's residents. What truly made Earth unique however, was that every human was born with a small seed of Chaos in their souls.

For millennia, the Prince had watched the savages of Earth. He saw their civilizations rise and fall. If there was one constant, it was that when enough of the Earth humans were in one place, destruction inevitably followed. The Chaos inside of them made such a conclusion inevitable. The Earthlings had already come close to destroying their own planet several times! If enough humans could be brought to the Land, all of those seeds of Chaos just might destroy it! He would be free!

That just left the problem of how to get enough of them there to accomplish his plan. Though the Prince was powerful, he could not just force them to go. Each and every being in the Universe had free will. The Earthlings had to *choose* to go to the Land. It was true that the Prince had collected a few souls here and there. There were

always mortals foolish enough to trade their immortal spark for material wealth or power. It was not enough though! He needed millions of Chaos Seeds in the Land, causing havoc and destruction. How could he convince so many? No answer presented itself. So he watched and waited.

Ultimately, the people of Earth found a magic of their own, called science. Their faith in science replaced older faiths which had warned of beings like the Prince. Their belief in science had even caused them to lose faith in the existence of the soul! He could not help but chuckle as paradoxically the amount of souls he captured increased. Who wouldn’t accept wealth and power in exchange for something they didn’t even think existed?

As more and more of the humans predictably sought to escape their mundane and banal existence, they found that release in many ways. Substances to cloud their minds, war, suicide, and other amusements. It took only a few centuries after their discovery of electrical power however, for them to develop games to distract from their pointless lives. Soon after, came the creation of virtual realities. These digital worlds gave millions of humans the escape they craved with their whole hearts, and unknowingly with their whole souls.

That was the key, the Vizier explained to him one day. Why try and convince these humans to trade their souls, when they were already begging for a new life? Why not give them what they were already asking for? It didn't take much work for the Prince to have one of his agents create a virtual world modeled after The Land. With his guidance, it quickly became the most popular and pervasive game on Earth. Millions played every day! They became the orc shaman that was powerful in a way that the tax account playing him in "real life" never was, or the sexy elf maiden who finally found that attention she craved, but no longer received as an aging housewife.

And as for the pesky matter of free will, each and EVERY player agreed to come to the Land willingly. They signed their digital names to the contract when they started playing the game. After all, the Prince thought with a small smile, who had time to read all that fine print?

PROLOGUE



EARTH, North America, 2037

“I swear to God Silk! If you get caught on the way in just because you’re trying to steal some cheap loot, I’m going to nail your nuts to a stump and kick you backwards!”

“Calm down Crush! Jesus! Where the hell do you get this stuff?!” Silk put down the gold candlestick he had picked up, hearing the sound of chuckles over the group chat. “I’m on it.”

The rest of the party watched safely from behind a grove of trees several hundred yards away, nearly invisible in the dark. They would

not have been able to see anything, but Jewel had cast the spell Shared Vision to let the rest of them see through Silk's eyes.

"I will not calm down!" said Crush, "You're messing with the big payday!"

"He's not wrong Silk," said Loki. "It has taken us forever to first find this castle, then fight through the Wilds, and finally break through the defenses to allow you a small window of time to get in! No one on the forums has even heard of the Castle of Transition! The loot we could get from this place will probably be artifact!"

"Okay, okay fearless leader! I'm on it." As Silk spoke, he looked down and gave the four of them a great view of him scratching his virtual balls.

"You're a dick, Silk!" said Daliah.

A low chuckle came over the group chat as Silk made his way down the stairs to the lower levels, "That's not what you said the other n-" The rest of the comment was lost to everyone as Daliah sent a psychic pulse through the spell connection. It was the mental equivalent of stubbing your toe in the middle of the night on the way to the bathroom, minor but insanely irritating.

“Enough Silk!” shouted Loki, “and cut that crap out Daliah! I hate that!” The rest of the group was nodding and glaring at Daliah, who had the good grace to look down and away.

Silk, for his part, stopped the chatter and continued down the dark hallway he found himself in. There were no torches or other light, and if not for his Sense of the Bat skill that Rogues only found upon reaching the lofty level of 130, then he would have been knocking into walls. Luckily their entire party was ranked in the top 100 groups in The Land, so none of them were noobs.

What was strange was the complete lack of monsters and NPCs (non-player characters) in the castle. The lands surrounding the castle were teeming with creatures and difficult terrain. It had taken Jewel a solid day to burrow a hole in the shield covering the castle, burning through countless replenish mana potions. It meant that the castle shield had an ungodly amount of HPs (health points)! And the hole had barely lasted a few seconds before shutting again. Silk had managed to squeeze through, but no one else had been able to follow. It meant that if he got in trouble he was totally hosed!

He had yet to encounter any resistance though. The layout had no hidden traps he could detect, no maze like corridors and no enemies! It was like it was inviting him in… hopefully inviting him into

the treasure room, Silk thought gleefully. He would love some artifact level gear, like those Gloves of Dark Beckoning that Chinese kid had posted he'd found in a secret labyrinth. Lucky a-hole!

As Silk made his way down a fifth spiral staircase, green light came from the bottom, and the entire party held their breath in anticipation. Months of work were hopefully about to pay off. He stepped into a round room, and they saw the source of the light. It was coming from an arch of black crystal. In the arch was a rippling Dartmouth green energy field. Looking at it was almost like staring straight down into a deep and limitless ocean on a stormy day. In front of the arch was a short column with the indentation of a hand print on top. In the rest of the room there was… nothing else.

"Are you effing kidding me? Where is the loot," Crush shouted. The rest of the group kept quiet, but all were sharing the same disappointment.

"Maybe it's back up top," Jewel said. "Down another corridor?"

"So what do I do here," asked Silk, "do I put my hand on it? Do a little dance maybe?"

"You could make a little love," Loki said.

“Maybe get down tonight,” Crush finished, light chuckles coming over the chat line.

“Uhhhh, I say touch it,” a voice said.

“Was that you Daliah? I don’t know why I keep expecting you to be smart just because you’re psychic! What should I do Loki?”

“Uh… touch it,” he replied.

“Thanks oh fearless leader,” Silk exclaimed. “You’re about as useful as a swiss cheese condom.”

He braced himself to touch the pedestal. He was really hoping there wasn’t any pain. Even though the game muted it down, even a minor burn or electrical shock could ruin your whole morning. Still though, they hadn’t come all this way for nothing! Silk placed his hand on the imprint.

“Are you the agent of your people?” a deep voice boomed, seeming to come from all directions at once. At the same time the only door leading out of the room clanged shut.

Immediately lowering his body and drawing both daggers, Silk quickly looked around. There was no place for anyone to be hiding. They could always be cloaked or veiled, but his True Sight had maxed out forty levels ago, and no players or NPCs had been able

to hide from him for quite a while. Assuming it must have been a game prompt, he tried to chat with his group, but no one answered his queries. Shrugging to himself he answered.

“Uhhh, yeah.”

The voice spoke again. “Do you embrace a life of adventure and danger, love and betrayal, power and wonder?”

“Yes.” The words came out stronger, Silk’s greedy little heart imagining the top shelf loot they were about to get.

“Will you be among the first to move forward, preparing the way for others?”

“Hell yeah,” Silk shouted, throwing both fists in the air.

Silence greeted his shout. After a few seconds, he realized that unless you are an asian time traveler who had saved a cheerleader, you just couldn’t pull this stance off. Before he could lower his arms though, he heard another voice. It was quite different from the previous deep bass, and it said in a self-satisfied tone, “Thrice heard and witnessed.”

The world flashed white and…

CHAPTER 1



James covered his eyes against the sunlight that seemed determined to drive ice picks (naw, I'm better than that… fire picks? yeah, much better he thought sleepily). Yes! Fire picks through his eyes just because he had slept in! It was Saturday wasn't it? He was having trouble remembering the night before. Reaching down, he tried to pull the covers over his head, except he couldn't find them. In fact, as his hand fell back to his mattress everything felt remarkably, well… grassy! Also his pillow felt surprisingly like a rock jabbing into his back!

Showing bravery on par with assaulting a horde of giants, or talking to a really hot chick sitting at the bar, he opened his eyes and took in his surroundings. He was in a small glen studded with wild flowers and colorful plants. At his back was a large shelf of stone, and beyond it were the foot hills of mountains rising in the distance. The trees in front of him formed the other boundary of the glen. They rose tall and majestic. The scent of pines mingled with the fragrance of the flowers. Birds of various types could be heard performing call and refrain. The moss growing on the trees was a brilliant green, and there was a crystal clear pool several feet in diameter between him and the stone outcropping. It was one of the most serene and beautiful settings he had ever seen. It evoked in him feelings of connection and tranquility, and he expressed himself accordingly.

“What the hell!!!”

He sat upright as quickly as he could, not at all helping the headache that blazed in intensity at his swift movement. Looking down, he imagined it might have something to do with the curved rock that had been under his head, and the tender lump he felt as his fingers searched his scalp. As he took in his surroundings he was interrupted by a slightly off key, and resigned sounding voice, that spoke from just over his left shoulder.

“About time you woke up!”

Turning his head, slower this time, he saw the small form of an imp lazily flapping its wings as it hovered three feet off the ground! It had gray dusky skin, and pitch black, bat like wings perched on its back. Its body was humanoid, if only one foot tall. James stared at it in fascination. The VR module had never produced a creature so lifelike and unique before. Standing up, he slowly walked closer examining it in wonder until he was only an inch away. Which was the moment right before it kicked him in the eye.

“Ahhhh, you dirty little,” James immediately began swatting at it with his right hand while holding his eye with his left. It lazily floated out of the way of his swing, and rolled its eyes while sighing heavily.

“Look,” it said. “I’m here to help you and even if I wasn’t, it would take a lot more than a friggin noob to take me out. Now if you don’t want me here, I can always leave.” It turned its back as it spoke, and started to gain altitude with a faster flap of its wings.

“No wait!” James said quickly. “I just don’t know what’s going on. Last thing I remember, I was in this castle, and then there was just a light, and now I’m here. And who are you calling a noob?!”

Ignoring his question, the imp faced him again and regarded him silently for a moment. It was almost like it was daring him to say something else to offend it. With a small nod to itself (himself?), it began to speak again.

“Okay noob, you are in The Land. You are NOT playing a game anymore. I’m going to say it slowly this time. You… Are… NOT… In… A… Game! Your mind and soul have been transported here and placed in this body. Let this sink in. If you look around you, you can see that you are in a small glade. This is a safe haven, but as soon as you leave you can die. If you die, then you will come back to this point, unless you find another safe location or town to bind your spawn point to. The good news is that no one else should be able to find their way here. Even if they did, the enchantments on this glade should keep them out unless you lead them in.”

James opened his mouth, but stopped when the imp raised its hand.

“This will go a lot faster if you just listen. A being a lot stronger, and I’m guessing smarter, than you has paid me A LOT more than you’re worth to talk to you. Believe me, millions of those other noob Seeds will not be getting this treatment, so just listen. As I was saying, you were brought here by some higher being. No, I don’t

know who. I’m here to give you some basic info about this world so you don’t become troll dung in the first few minutes.”

“The Land is bigger than the world you came from. You are one of the first of your people to be brought to The Land, and you were lucky enough to be brought to this little safe haven. Apparently where most of you will land is random. Some of you might be in towns or cities, some in forests or mountains, and some will probably be dead on arrival because they fell into oceans and drowned. Who cares right? You have landed in the Forest of Nadria, on the Rivers Peninsula. Do you remember anything about this location?”

“Yeah, it’s near the Kingdom of Yves. Supposed to be a section of land with a crazy amount of rivers crisscrossing through it. As far as I know the patch to travel here wasn’t released yet though.”

“Good, you’re not completely useless,” the imp said. “The Land is not exactly like the game that you remember. Your character won’t be either. Case in point,” the imp snapped his fingers and a hand sized wasp flashed into existence. The imp casually looked at James and simply said, “Attack.”

The wasp immediately flew at James with its stinger extended as it curled its body. He quickly rolled to the side hearing and feeling a buzzing pass just by his ear. He tried to activate the HIDE action of

his character Silk. The wasp upon missing with its first pass, immediately turned around and flew at him again. It clearly still saw him. This time the stinger punctured his left bicep. Red hot agony seared through his body as he swatted the wasp away, and it flew back into the air.

That pain was worse than anything he had every felt! What the hell was going on? The pain dampeners were not supposed to allow ANYTHING to hurt that much, let alone just the sting of a wasp on steroids! He picked up a rock with his right hand and activated True Aim, throwing it at the wasp. It easily dodged to the side though, the rock missing and accomplishing nothing. That was not supposed to happen, he thought. At his high skill level, there was less than a 1% chance of a projectile missing when he activated True Aim.

With no apparent thought at all to the injustice of the situation, the wasp flew in and stung him again in the other arm. Agony lanced through him a second time, and he noticed a small green skull and cross bones in the bottom right corner of his vision. Unable to fight off the wasp as neither arm was working, he fell back seeing the red horizontal bar in the top left corner of his vision was half gone. When he fell to the ground, the wasp pulled its stinger out of his arm and

flew towards his head. He screwed his eyes shut as he awaited a poisonous needle to the face!

But nothing happened. He peeked a glance, opening one eye. He saw the wasp flying lazily around the imp who looked at him dispassionately.

“Well what have we learned?” the imp asked putting emphasis on the last word.

“WTF?!?”

“Well I hope you’ve learned more than that.”

“Why didn’t any of my skills work? And why did that hurt so much? Why is it still hurting?! And why did that hurt so much?!?” James’ voice grew louder and shriller with each question.

“I already told you noob, you’re not your character. I told you twice! You are not a level 167 thief. Those classes don’t exist the way they did in the game. It requires a lot for you to qualify for a Profession, and you are nowhere NEAR that powerful yet. Don’t worry about it. Right now you are just some guy with two wasp stings in his arms, drooling on the moss. You have been sent to The Land from your world. You are really here! Not… your… character. Check out your status page.”

“How,” James asked. He would deny it til his dying day, but there was a bit of a whine in his voice now.

“Will it,” the imp replied simply.

Shutting the throbbing in his arms out his mind for a moment, he focused on wanting to see his status page. Suddenly his vision was blocked by a translucent rectangle.

Name: ???
Age: 24
Level: 1, 0%
Health: 100 Mana: 100 Stamina: 100
Strength: 10
Agility: 10
Dexterity: 10
Constitution: 10
Endurance: 10
Intelligence: 10
Wisdom: 10
Charisma: 10
Luck: 10
Abilities:
Limitless
Gift of Tongues
Skills:
None
Marks:
None
Resistances:
None
Race: Human (Chaos Seed)
Reputation: Lvl 1 “Who are you again?”
Alignment: Neutral
Language: All

Willing the window to go away, he focused back on the imp who started talking again.

“So I guess you now know you’re the definition of a basic bitch.”

“Excuse me?” Richter was convinced that he had misheard. The wasp stings had been embarrassing, but this was just too much!

“I was chosen to speak to you because I have paid attention to your world. It means there is a slightly higher chance of an ape like you understanding when an enlightened being like myself deigns to speak with you. Now seeing as how my wasp has just made you its bitch and your stats are all basic, ipso facto, my earlier assertion of your status. Any more questions?”

James just stared at the imp with his mouth hanging slightly open, swollen arms hanging at his sides, blinking in disbelief.

“Annyywayyy, you’ll be able to examine your stats in more detail later. Do you know the difference between abilities and skills?”

Shaking his head at the imp’s ridiculous attitude, James replied, “Abilities are things you are born with or are given to you, skills can be learned. But I don’t know what Marks are.”

“That makes sense, they weren’t included in the game you played. Marks will appear as small tattoos on your body, they can indicate allegiance or increases in abilities you have picked up. I’m told technically they can represent religious affiliation as well, but

since there aren't any gods in The Land, no one knows for sure. Right now I'm guessing you have nothing in any of these areas. Do you?"

James examined his two abilities more closely.

LIMITLESS – you can proceed to any level in any skill with 100% affinity.

GIFT OF TONGUES – you can speak and understand any language. You cannot speak to lower lifeforms or higher beings.

He related these to the imp whose face took on a look of surprise.

"So that's why he's invested in you," the imp said under its breath. "Well Gift of Tongues is pretty self-explanatory, you can understand humanoids and other sentient beings, but not animals or beings of higher power like myself. For example, *shi rine ka frine parul cha.* Did you understand any of that?"

"No," he replied. "What did it mean?"

"Don't worry about it," the imp said with a smirk. "Your language ability will definitely be useful, but what's truly interesting is your other ability. Every creature born has a predisposition to being good at some things and bad at others. You might be a natural dancer so you have an 80% chance to increase your level with practice. You

might be naturally clumsy, and so only have a 10% chance of increasing as a pick pocket. In that case you will almost assuredly have a low level no matter how much you practice. Apparently whatever you try to learn you have the ability to increase with no cap. You could one day be very powerful," it said thoughtfully. "I would keep the knowledge about this ability to myself if I were you, there are those who would kill you now for fear of what you will become."

"But not you," James asked.

"I was well paid to advise you. Trust me when I say that you're lucky to have me. For an eternal being like myself, if I can't be trusted to do a job, I don't get many more."

"Fair enough," James said. He was still trying to breathe through the pain, and it was starting to make focusing on the conversation more difficult.

"Now, I'm sure by that pained expression on your face, you've realized that your health is not restoring. Lower health means more pain, and total loss of health will cause death of course. Low mana makes it harder to think and low stamina makes you sluggish. While magic and stamina will replenish over time, your health will not without prolonged rest or healing magic. As a Chaos Seed you will

heal faster than others, wounds improving over hours rather than days, but still it will take time without help. As so," the imp waved its hand and shadowy tendrils extended to touch James' arms finally providing relief to the burning ache of his arms.

James immediately started breathing easier seeing the red bar of his health growing, "Thank you very much! I'm obviously completely lost here, and despite that first cheap shot, I appreciate your help. Would you please tell me your name so I can address you properly?"

The imp smiled genuinely for the first time, "You may call me Xuetrix. That is of course not my real name. You must never give your real name as with the right knowledge or abilities it might allow great power over you. Now with that said, what should people call you?"

A translucent screen appeared in front of his gaze again. It simply said, "Name:" and had a blinking cursor after it.

James thought for a moment, happy with the advice. His character Silk had served him well, but if what Xuetrix said was true then his power could increase exponentially. If he was really in a new world, he planned on getting as strong as possible and making an impact. He would shake the ground and his accomplishments would only be measured by…"

James smiled and looked at Xuetrix.

“My name is Richter.”

CHAPTER 2



“What’s a Chaos Seed,” Richter asked looking at his race.

“It is the type of human you are. I am actually not sure what that means exactly, so you will have to discover that by yourself. Everyone from your world is a Chaos Seed is what I was told, though. That also might be a piece of information that you will want to keep to yourself. It doesn’t exactly sound warm and cuddly, and the various peoples of The Land might take it the wrong way,” the imp advised. Richter accepted the advice silently.

“Very well Richter. It’s time for us to part ways. The last advice I will give you is that though you should advance as quickly as

possible, always remember that it’s not all about level. After all, a level 100 rabbit could never kill a level 1 wyvern. It is the application of power that rules the day, not the simply having power. THINK! Learn what you can, and be careful how you treat those you encounter. You never know when the actions of today will impact the outcome of tomorrow.”

“Thank you Xuetrix, I really you owe you,” Richter said, extending his hand.

“What?” Xuetrix said looking confused.

“I said I owe you.”

“Really?”

“Yes,” Richter said with some exasperation.

“Thrice heard and witnessed,” the imp said with a sly smile.

A notification popped into Richter’s view

You have agreed to do Xuetrix a favor. Failure to do so when asked will cause a decrease in your reputation with all beings, and other unknown consequences. Keep in mind, your word means everything!

By the time he cleared the message he was greeted by the sight of the imp hovering with its wasp, a small smile on its face. Then the

devilish creature just snapped its fingers, and they both vanished to the faint smell of sulfur.

“I’ve got to learn to keep my trap shut,” Richter said aloud with a deep sigh.

“Enjoy my gifts, Richter,” Xuetrix’s disembodied voice said. “I like powerful friends, especially when they owe me favors. Hahaha.” Four items dropped to the ground in front of him.

Picking up all four, he was awarded with new message notifications.

You have received: Simple short bow. Damage 8-13. Durability 15/15. Item class: Common. Quality: Average. Weight: 4.1 kg

You have received: Basic arrows with quiver. Quantity x10. Damage 3-5. Durability 2/2. Item class: Common. Quality: Average. Weight: 1.1 kg.

You have received: Minor ring of healing. Will heal 30 health on wearer. Cool down 10 minutes. Can be used twice per day. Durability 8/8. Item class: Common. Quality: Average. Weight: 0.1 kg

You have received: Dull bronze knife. Damage 2-4. Durability 20/20. Item class: Common. Quality: Average. Weight: 2.0 kg

Slipping the ring on his finger and the quiver over his shoulder, he finally took in his surroundings and attire. He was wearing a sleeveless tunic and rough spun brown pants. On his feet were dark tan moccasins. He actually might be extremely stylish on Rodeo drive as he remembered hearing something about the “peasant” look making a comeback. Only thing missing was… Yup! Richter definitely needed to be the first person to invent both cotton and boxer briefs in this world. Whatever ‘roughspun’ was, it was definitely NOT the fabric of his life!

Looking around he examined the small glade. The pool of crystal clear water abutting the rock face was surrounded by multicolored plants. A line of trees hid the small glade from view, creating a hidden enclave. Walking up to the pool he looked down at the plants, but could not identify any of them. Herbs always came in useful in games though, so he decided to grab them.

You have picked up an unknown plant. Due to a lack of herbalism you have destroyed the plant. Maybe you can use what is left to apologize to your mom.

Shaking his head, Richter thought, What is with these messages? Seeing nothing else that could be of use he turned to leave the glade, but stopped as he was thirsty. Going over to the pool he

paused as he saw his reflection in the still water. A man's face stared back at him. The expression was curious and kind. He had chestnut colored skin, and hazel eyes. His hair was cut short and was a mop of black curls close to his head. It looked like his old face, but leaner and more rugged. It was a visage he could live with.

He knelt down to scoop some water in his hands, but hesitated. Should he drink this? Everything here seemed to have some meaning. What if this was the Pool of Eternal Firerrhea? He was already thirsty though, and drinking from an unknown source would always be a risk.

Taking a deep breath, he sipped from the water in his hand.

You have tasted the Waters of Clarity. You can see the way forward with greater ease than any others. Experience increased by 25% for the next twenty four hours.

Score! Let's get this going!

Happy with his lucky starting point (falling into an ocean or volcano would probably not have been super fun), Richter walked out of the glade, and into his new life.

Leaving the glen, he felt a slight tingling. After walking through the trees for several yards, he looked back and saw what appeared

to be only a stand of trees next to a cliff face. No one would be finding the glade without help. For some reason, knowing that his starting point in the world was hidden away brought him a sense of security. He realized then that finding it himself might be a problem later. Losing something as clutch as that Pool of Clarity would be a bone head move of epic proportions. He spent about half an hour rolling medium-small rocks to the base of trees. They would look innocuous enough individually, but taking a larger view, they formed a rough line toward the glen.

The forest seemed old. The trees grew massive, hundreds of feet into the air. There was large spacing between the large trunks, but the floor of the forest was littered with detritus from fallen branches and thick undergrowth. The air was filled with the song of birds that filled the branches above his head. The sun filtered through the leaves, but the canopy was thick enough that its position could not be clearly pinpointed. Walking forward he began to hunt. He was already a bit hungry. After only a short time, he heard a faint snuffling up ahead of him. Moving forward slowly he looked over a dip in the forest floor. A red fox was rooting through the leaves, hunting for some morsel or other. He slowly nocked an arrow making sure to avoid any extra noise. He paused a moment with the string taut as

he exhaled, then released! The arrow flew through the air, and hit the fox in its side. It let loose a high pitched squeal and attempted to run. Richter quickly nocked another air and let fly. It fell a foot short!

He ran to cut the fox off before it could leave the gully it had been searching in. Luckily the fox seemed to have trouble running with the arrow in its side and he was able to jump on it and drive his knife into its side.

Congratulations! You have reached skill level 1 in Archery.

Congratulations! You have reached skill level 1 in Small Blades.

Red Fox (Lvl 1) has died. You receive 8(+2) experience.

The prompts were translucent, and filled a small amount of his visual field. They disappeared at a thought and he looked down at the fox. Killing it was more real than anything had been in the game. The blood was warm and sticky on the hand that held the knife. It had kicked and moaned right before it died. The death of this small creature made his situation real in a way that nothing else had. Looking down at his vanquished foe, at the blood on the ground, at the life that was forever extinguished, something welled up inside of him. He fought the impulse, but he was helpless against it and

shouted, “What does the fox say? Ba ring ring ring ba ring ba ring ring!”

Chuckling to himself he retrieved his arrow, and then picked up the fox by the tail for later as well as his missed arrow. He kept moving forward. Over the next few hours of walking through the forest he killed several more foxes and more than a few rabbits. He collected them until:

TRING!

You have reached level 2! Through hard work you have moved forward along your path. As a Chaos Seed you gain 6 points to distribute to characteristics instead of the usual 4. You also get 25% advancement to the skill of your choice! Crush your enemies, honor your allies, LIVE!

Not bad, not bad! Seeing as his most valuable skill so far was Archery, he added his 25% there and was rewarded with another screen.

Congratulations! You have reached skill level 2 in archery. +2% bonus to aim. +2% bonus to damage.

Not a bad day’s work, Richter my boy!

With that thought, he collected all of the game he had hunted, and then headed back to his glade for a rest.

CHAPTER 3



Upon waking, he quickly obtained his 25% exp bonus from the Pool and left the glade. He decided not to place the points of his new level in any one area until he knew more about the world around him. He decided he would follow a river that he had crossed yesterday. His stomach rumbling he wished he could have cooked the foxes that he had killed, but without the ability to make a fire he had simply tossed the carcasses a small distance from the glen for the local wildlife to consume. His hunger had not gotten to the point of eating raw meat. Getting the trots from some weird alien bacterial infection was NOT on his to-do list. He had left the pelts to dry on a rock in the glade in full view of sunlight.

Making his way to the river, he quickly started walking upriver. It wasn't overly large at this point only about two dozen yards across. After about half an hour of walking, he found a bush with large bluish berries. Hunger outweighing caution, he took a handful, and placed them in his mouth. Upon swallowing he received the notification.

You have eaten Blue Forest Berries. Concentration increased by 5% for the next four hours.

He quickly placed another handful in his mouth hoping for a cumulative bonus. Nothing. Well, he thought, that would have been the cheat to end all cheats. Watch out dragons, I have a magic bush! Chuckling at his awesome joke, he kept moving. He didn't really notice any kind of difference, but what would an increase in concentration feel like anyway? Richter was sure that a couple of his ex-girlfriends might be able to tell him, but they were all in another world now, so who cared?! With the edge taken off of his hunger, he continued walking forward.

Keeping an eye out for small game, he killed three more foxes until he heard the voices. At first he had mistaken it for bird song, but the more he listened he could make out faint words being spoken ahead of him.

"Get ready."

“I’ve been ready. I’m always ready!”

“Quiet now, he’s almost here. We need to stun him so he can be questioned.”

“I know what we need to do!”

“Quit arguing,” a third voice said sternly.

Not quite believing that he was hearing an argument about what he was pretty sure was an attack on him, Richter stopped walking.

“Why did he stop walking?”

“How should I know?

“I didn’t think you would know! I was just wondering out loud!”

“As opposed to wondering in quiet? That would be better.”

“Shut up! Should we just attack him?”

“Yeah, let’s attack!”

Still feeling that he was being punked in some way until that last musical statement, he quickly shouted, “Wait!”

Suddenly all was quiet.

Slowly backing up, Richter cast his gaze around looking for the speakers. He didn’t see anything though. Either way, downriver was

suddenly looking like a much better option. He was backing up until he heard a musical voice behind him.

“How do you know what we are saying? Humans never know what we are saying! Even most elves don’t remember sprite speak.”

Quickly turning around, he saw nothing except the scrub hugging the banks of the river.

“I asked, how do you know what I am saying?”

The voice came from the bush directly in front of him. As he focused, it seemed that the air blurred in front of him, and the leaves became green clothing for a small man. He stood three and a half feet tall. He had an almost childlike smoothness to his olive skin. The features were Asian in appearance, and the eyes had no whites. They reminded Richter of an owl’s eyes, all bright color and pupil. What really captivated his attention however, was the fully drawn bow pointing at his face.

“He can’t understand us, let’s just kill him and be done with it,” Richter heard from behind him.

“No! I can understand you! I’m sorry if I trespassed into your territory. I’m new to this world, and I’m just trying to survive!”

The arrow still pointed at Richter’s face, the creature in front of him said, “We have never found a human that understood us before.” Silence reigned for a short while. “We will take him to the Hearth Mother.” Staring Richter in the eye, the small man lowered his voice menacingly (at least Richter thought it was supposed to be menacing, hard to tell since it all sounded like bird song). “Don’t think we can’t hurt you. We may be smaller than you, but believe me we know how to defend ourselves. Show him!”

And with that statement, a small blue blur flew by the right of Richter’s head and struck a fallen log in the river with a large bang! Woodchips and splinters flew in all directions as he quickly covered his eyes and turned away.

“That was only one arrow,” the small man warned menacingly, “and you will never see the next one coming!”

“I understand,” Richter said to the Napoleonic figure in front of him. “You’re in charge.”

“Don’t forget it, human. Now turn around and keep walking.”

Richter continued moving forward along the bank. The only conversation being the near constant bickering of the unseen pair in

front of him. Looking back he could still make out the form of the small creature behind, bow no longer drawn but arrow still nocked.

After several hours of walking, there was a break in the forest canopy, and the sun was seen well more than halfway across the sky. The trees suddenly parted to reveal a large meadow with golden waist high grass. A humongous oak was situated in the middle. The tree was easily the size of a forty story apartment building, massively dwarfing all other trees in the forest. The river continued along several hundred yards to the right of the golden meadow. The river Richter had initially been following had apparently been only a side channel. It had joined another larger branch which they had continued to follow upstream. Though the river was not far away, enough trees had been in the way that he hadn't been able to see the meadow or huge tree in the middle until he was almost on top of them.

"Stop human," the creature behind him shouted. Speaking in a more normal voice he said, "Go ahead and tell the elders what we found. We need to see the Hearth Mother. No stopping for grog or gossip!"

Still grumbling the voices grew fainter as the other went off. Richter hadn't been able to catch sight of them, but he thought he

detected two small parts in the sea grass ahead of him moving towards the giant tree.

Richter did not have to wait long for a response.

The limbs of the tree rustled as if in a strong wind, though the grass in front of him did not move. Suddenly, in front of him stood the four foot tall figure of a woman. Wild red hair was bound up in a wild nest above her golden skin. A stern mouth sat beneath her bright green eyes studying him with obvious intelligence.

“Well met traveler,” she said in her smooth melodic voice. “You stand before the Hearth Tree of the Wood Sprites of Nadria. I am the Hearth Mother, protector of our people and keeper of our secrets. I am known as Hisako. What may we call you?”

“Richter, I am pleased to meet you,” he said respectfully.

She looked at him, nodding slightly to accept the respect paid. “Never before have one of the tall folk seen our home and lived, and yet, you speak our language and do not… feel like other humans. Why is this?”

“I am not from here. My home is called Earth. Specifically ATL, Ga shawty! No…? Okay then,” he gave a nervous laugh. Nothing like having a four foot tall Celtic druid appear in front of you to knock

you off your game. It also doesn't help when she insinuates that you won't make it out of here alive. If the pain that horrid wasp had caused him was any indication, then he wanted no part of those mini missiles the sprites seemed to be able to fire.

"Hmmm, Richter of Georgia. Very well. I sense no evil in you, though I also sense little good. You seem to be a blank slate somehow," she said as she continued to gaze at him consideringly. "I will give you the opportunity to prove yourself. The forest wolves have been encroaching on our territory of late. They all seem sickened somehow. If you cull their numbers, we will allow you to keep your life. We might find more use for you than simply watering the roots of the Hearth Tree."

You have been offered a Quest: Cleanse the Forest I. Diseased animals have been threatening the wellbeing of the Wood Sprites. Kill five wolves to show that you can be trusted. Reward: Safe passage through the lands of the Wood Sprites of the Forest of Nadria. Yes or No?

Somehow he was sure that "watering the roots" didn't mean setting up a crude irrigation system.

"I accept," he said.

“We will observe you on your task. Do not attempt to leave the forest.”

“I do have one issue though. I only have six arrows left, and little other gear to speak of.” The other arrows had been lost or broken during his day of hunting.

She gave a short melodic laugh, “Always true of a human, looking to take as much as he can. So be it. Accept this gift of the Wood Sprites.” She then closed her eyes and began to chant softly as a green glow surrounded her. Only a few seconds later, she had in her hands, human sized arrows of dark wood with green tendrils tracing down the shaft.

You have been given Sprite Arrows of Nature. Quantity 20. Durability 4/4. Item class: Uncommon. Quality: Above Average. Accuracy +1. Damage +1

Now that’s and upgrade, he thought with a smile. “Let’s go hunt some wolves!”

CHAPTER 4



Richter was led around the tall golden grass surrounding the Hearth Tree. It was made perfectly clear that he was not allowed any closer to the sprites' home. He was told that the wolves had been attacking other animals with abandon. They were even not eating much of the animals except for perhaps a few bites. It meant the wolves were killing for sport. Also they had been ranging downriver, closer to the Hearth Tree than they normally did. Though none of the sprites had been killed yet, apparently there had been some close calls. Looking to his right, he spied the taciturn wood sprite that had led him to the Hearth Tree. He found out his name was Sion. Even though he no longer aimed an arrow at him, Richter could feel the

animosity radiating in the sprite's gaze. The Hearth Mother had sent the small man to accompany him on his quest. Sion had not been pleased with the order.

After walking for half an hour, he attempted to engage the sprite in conversation.

"So what can you tell me about the forest?"

"That it's much more likely we will be eaten if you make a bunch of irritating noise asking idle questions," Sion answered. His gaze never even wandering in Richter's direction, he continued to scan the trees.

Having had just about enough of this green clad munchkin, Richter replied, "I didn't mean to invade your territory. I was just hunting in the woods, and if you don't want to be here why don't you just go back and tell Hisako that you don't want to accompany me?"

"We do not bicker and argue like humans. We do not question the wisdom of our leaders, and by knowing of our place, we serve the Spirit of the Forest. I would not bring dishonor upon myself by saying that it's absolutely ridiculous that we need a smelly stomper like yourself to help us, especially when I can't reliably determine the

difference from when he has spoken or broken wind." Sion paused for a moment, "I would never utter such words."

This speech, which comprised probably 75% of the all the words Sion had spoken since meeting him, was delivered in the same disinterested tone as those Geek Squad douches who recommended a customer plug the laptop in to fix the fact that it wouldn't turn on anymore. (Speaking as former Genius Bar employee… those guys are the worst! Who needs to wear a uniform to install Windows?)

Richter simply ground his teeth as he stomped forward before saying under his breath, "No one told me those blue berries made you toot."

Continuing to move forward, it was about another hour before Sion raised his hand silently. Making eye contact, he motioned to a tree up in front of them to the left. Nocking an arrow, Richter slowly stepped forward, walking through the trees as silently as he could. As he passed a lichen covered boulder, he saw the wolf. Its head was down as it greedily tore into what looked to be a rabbit. It was a mangy thing, brown and dusky gray in patches. On its side was an area bare of hair, giving the appearance of having been gnawed

away. It would reach to almost waist height if it was standing straight up. He could see its ribs silhouetted against its skin.

Slowing his breathing, he released the arrow with his exhale and struck the wolf its haunch. It immediately dropped the rabbit with a yelp and turned its eyes towards him, teeth bared. Richter saw its blood shot eyes and foaming mouth, and knew he had discovered the reason for the wolves leaving their normal hunting grounds. They were rabid! All such deductive thoughts fled his mind however, as it launched itself at him, seeming to cover the twenty yards in a blink. Reacting instinctively he dove to the left barely missing the wolf's lunge. He fell sprawling, arrows falling out of his quiver and over his shoulder. Knowing he had bare moments before feeling the wolf's teeth sink into him, he drew his dagger and rolled over. He had barely turned when the wolf was upon him, lunging for his throat. Shoving his forearm against the wolf's throat he attempted to stab it with the knife in his other hand, but the blade stopped on the wolf's ribs, barely penetrating. The wolf strained again, the fangs now mere inches from his face. Flecks of the wolf's slobber fell upon his face, mixed with gobbets of flesh from the animal it had been eating. It strained against his forearm to get close enough to sink its teeth into Richter's throat and end his life.

Screaming in horror and anger, Richter adjusted the angle of the knife in his hands and stabbed it into the wolf on top of him. The blade now easily slide between the ribs of the wolf as he stabbed it again and again, hot blood spilling over his blade, then his hand and then his arm, but he still didn't stop and neither did it. Changing his angle of attack he stabbed farther up towards the wolf's head and felt the knife pierce the wolf's heart with the barest resistance followed by a small pop. The wolf seemed unaware of its own death for the briefest of moments before collapsing on top of Richter.

"Ahhh, Arghh," Richter grunted attempting to push the wolf's body off of himself, and then instead settled on rolling it to the side. He took several deep frantic breaths as he willed his heart to stop beating so wildly.

Rabid Forest Wolf (Lvl 4) has died. You receive 32(+8) exp

Staring up at the green canopy above him with splotches of blue seen through the leaves, he was elated. "Woooo," he shouted punching his first into the air. Turning his head to the right, he saw Sion looking at him quizzically.

"What are you doing," the sprite asked.

"I'm celebrating, and where were you during the fight?"

“This is your quest, not mine. And it is clear that you’re celebrating. I meant, why are you celebrating when those other wolves are right over there,” Sion asked pointing to Richter’s left.

Slowing turning his head to the left, he saw two rabid wolves with their teeth bared, not 15 feet away. Before he could move, the wolves were on him and his world narrowed to consist only of fangs, blood, and above all, pain.

All color faded from his vision as his remaining eye stared up at a wolf’s mouth closing around his face, and then all was black.

You have died.

A blur of colors and the sensation of great speed, complicated by a lack of all emotion, until he felt as if he was falling from a great height with a heart clenching stop…

A horrid scream ripped itself from Richter’s throat. “Nooo, please stop, pleassseee!” His arms flailing around, his head whipped around wildly searching for the wolves. After a few frantic seconds, he realized he was back in the hidden glen, and his conscious mind began to reconcile the subconscious knowledge he already possessed. He had died. The wolves had killed him! Closing his eyes, he curled up onto his side and cried. There was nothing

graceful or dignified about it. His body was immobilized by his great racking sobs.

They had been tearing at him! They had torn off a piece of his chest before he died. He had… he had seen… that damn wolf had been chewing on a piece of him! The horror of it washed over Richter. He relived the cold feeling he had experienced at the moment of death. He drowned in the memory of helplessness as the wolves teeth had torn and ripped at his tender flesh. Those memories hammered at his psyche! His mental torture physically manifested in his inability to leave the fetal position. As soon as he came to the end of his nightmarish remembrance, the sequence started again from the beginning. He relived the experience over and over, not able to break free of this hellish loop.

As his mind continued to torture him however, another emotion rose. As he thought about the experience and the pain, he began to feel something else besides horror. It started as the kernel of a feeling, barely noticeable, inconsequential even. But it grew. After a while he recognized this feeling. He felt anger! No, that wasn't the right word. He felt… rage! He raged at the wolves for hurting him! He raged at Sion for not helping him! More though, he raged at being helpless and afraid! Not just in the past moments, or the past day,

but instead at feeling just a bit afraid his entire life! Of not having any true control over his life's direction, and instead bowing time and again to the demands of society, the demands of his family, or the ridiculous demands he made of himself fueled by reality TV and pop culture. He felt the need to take control over his own life, face any issue head on and no longer escape! He felt, the need, for power! Richter broke the loop of pain he had been reliving and stood, a fierce determination in his eyes. This was not about denying something horrible had happened. That would have been just another form of escape. This was about accepting the realities of his life and, despite the numerous blows of fate, standing tall!

You are Resolute! The choices in your life led you to a critical point. A nexus of opportunities were laid before you, many leading to disaster! You have chosen a finer path! The experiences of your entire life have culminated in this one moment. You have decided not to kneel, but to stand; not to beg, but to take; not to wait, but to forge ahead. Bonus to mental resistance 15%. Bonus to spiritual resistance 15%

Staring at the message across his field of view, he blinked in surprise. He had not expected the Universe to reward him for his own personal journey, but he would take it, and after a fashion it

made sense. While he could increase his speed, strength, and skills, he would ultimately be the same person, unless he decided to change within. With a firm twist to his lips, Richter smiled. It was time to get back to work.

The phantoms pains of the wolf attack still plagued him somewhat, but they had lost much of their power over him. They were illusions, and would not deter him. What was real was the air in his lungs, the power in his limbs and the strength of his will. Backlight by the sun shining down into the glade, and took a step forward to go and finish what he had started. It was at that moment of true purpose, that he looked down, and realized he was completely naked.

“Universe, you’re a dick.”

CHAPTER 5



Making peace with the fact that it was most likely not going to be fun running through a forest with no clothes, he decided to check his status.

Name: Richter
Age: 24
Level: 2, 0%
Health: 100 Mana: 100 Stamina: 100
Strength: 10
Agility: 10
Dexterity: 10
Constitution: 10
Endurance: 10
Intelligence: 10
Wisdom: 10
Charisma: 10
Luck: 10
Abilities:
Limitless
Gift of Tongues
Skills:

Archery Lvl 2 0% to next level, 100% affinity
Small Blades Lvl 1; 0% to next level, 100% affinity
Marks:
None
Resistances:
Mental 15%
Spiritual 15%
Race: Human (Chaos Seed)
Reputation: Lvl 1 “Who are you again?”
Alignment: Neutral
Language: All

He had expected the loss in experience, but the loss in skill progression was a bit of a shock. At his low level, it was not much of a setback. Skills were always harder to level at high levels though, and a loss at that point would truly hurt. If he remembered correctly, neither skill had been close to leveling when he died. Maybe if his percentage was greater, he wouldn’t always go back to zero. Either way, dying had real consequences.

The real question facing him now was where to place his unused points. He had no idea what he was going to need in this wide world. The lack of professions was a complete game changer. To be specific, Xuetrix had said that professions were just very different and hard to obtain. That information was next to useless at this point though, offering no guidance at all. Dismissing it from his mind, Richter focused on what he did know. He decided that he needed greater speed to run and dodge if he was going to hunt the wolves.

He placed all six unused points in Agility. The last thing he did was decide to limit some of his prompts. The combat and individual experience notifications were a distraction he could live without.

Silently vowing to make up for his lost progression, he sipped from the Pool of Clarity, and then took off at a fast jog from the glen. As he made his way to the river, the small plants and stones hurt his feet, but not as much as he would have thought. Heartened, he increased his pace to a run, making his way upriver. He quickly learned what Athenian runners must have known thousands of years before; a man running with no clothes on was not exactly, secure, in a key area. He took back all of the times he wished sports bras had not been invented. Those poor girls must really hurt after a while! He amended his thought to, ‘Well, let’s be honest, almost all the times.’ The sight of Sophia doing hurdles was a treasured memory! Sigh.

Focusing on the task at hand, he continued running forward, his new body seemingly up to the task of moving at high speed for several miles before running out of steam. He pushed himself until his breath grew ragged, and sweat flowed in rivulets down his body, and then he pushed more. He ran until his stamina bar came perilously close to zero, and fainting seemed a real possibility. He would pause while it slowly built back up, but at 50%, would take off

again. He had run many miles, and was nearing the end of his stamina for at least the tenth time, when he heard melodic voices above him.

“Quick! Shoot before he gets any closer!”

Throwing his hands up, he said, “Stop! I’m Richter, and have been seen by the Hearth Mother. I am approaching the Hearth Tree to fulfill the quest she posed to me. I will kill the wolves.”

There was a moment of silence until he heard a quiet, “Proceed.”

Though he couldn’t see them, he knew he was being shadowed by the sprites. Word of his approach would likely make its way ahead of him, but he still slowed to a jog so as not to alarm the wary sprites. Checking his status, he saw that his Agility had increased by +1 due to his hours of running. After proceeding for a ways through the forest, he was finally rewarded with the sight of the Hearth Tree. As he approached the tall gold grass, the forms of Hisako, Sion and four other bowmen greeted him

Hisako looked upon him with a wary glance upon her face, while Sion stared at him with open distaste.

“Why have you returned,” she asked. “I know that you had fallen.”

Walking forward, Richter did not answer, but instead moved until he stood directly in front of Sion. With the flat of his hand, Richter slapped him across the face. The sprite fell to the ground, and Richter fell on top of him preparing to strike him again. He heard the creaking of drawn bows, and then the sharp command of the Hearth Mother, “CEASE THIS NOW!”

Richter felt his body seize into immobility while Sion cursed beneath him, staring into his face with a fury that matched his own. Sion stood and drew a long needle like rapier from his sword belt, drawing his arm back to drive it into Richter’s eye, until Hisako spoke again, “I said cease! Now what is the meaning of this? What exactly do you remember?”

Richter found he could move and speak again, collapsing to the ground as she ended his paralysis. Quickly standing he pointed to Sion and spit out the words, “I remember everything. He let me be torn apart and eaten by the wolves while he just watched!”

Looking sharply at Sion, Hisako asked, “Is this true?”

“The quest was his not mine,” he grumbled not making eye contact with the Hearth Mother.

“Yet you knew that you were sent to help him, and thereby help our people by removing a dangerous threat! We will address this in a moment. My first question remains, Richter. Are you whole of mind? Do you feel any gaps in your memory?”

“I don’t know what you mean. I am alive and I know who I am,” he said. He had thought of what to tell the Hearth Mother during his run, but had not come to any clear conclusion. Upon seeing her, he decided to speak from strength. “I will always come back to finish my tasks, AND repay my debts,” he added looking over at Sion who glared back. “Why do you keep asking about my memory?”

Returning his gaze to Hisako, Richter saw her face had resolved into decision. “The Wood Sprites of Nadria honor their commitments. We entered into a pact with you when you agreed to the quest and my people have not aided you as they should have.” With a snap in her sweet voice she said, “Sion! Bring Richter his items! Now!” The male sprite was smart enough not to argue with the Hearth Mother after hearing the steel in her voice. He melded silently back into the grass, and was moving quickly if the part in the grass Richter could see was any indication.

“Your clothes were savaged and bloodied. Do not be concerned though. We will give you greater protection than those rags ever

provided in recompense for Sion’s behavior. I apologize for his part in the pain that you have suffered, and yet still I ask that you do not judge him too harshly. He has no love for humans, it is true, but his heart is stalwart, and he will stay true to a friend through death. In the meantime, please accept these gifts.” As she finished speaking, she closed her eyes and folded her hands as if in prayer. A green glow once again surrounded her, but much more intense than when she summoned the arrows. It grew in strength until it flared brilliantly. When his vision cleared from sunspots, he found items in front of him.

You have received: Chest Plate of the Wood Sprite. Defense +7. Type: Light armor. Durability 40/40. Item class: Uncommon. Quality: Above Average. Weight: 5.8 kg. Increased Concealment in Woods +5.

You have received: Reinforced pants of the Wood Sprite. Defense +5. Type: Light armor. Durability 30/30. Item class: Uncommon. Quality: Above Average. Weight: 3.4 kg. Increased Concealment in Woods +4.

You have received: Shoes of the Wood Sprite. Defense +4. Durability 25/25. Item class: Uncommon. Quality: Above Average.

Weight: 1.2 kg. Type: Light armor. Increased Silence while walking +10.

You have received: Bracers of the Wood Sprite. Defense +6. Weight: 3.4 kg. Durability 30/30. Item class: Uncommon. Quality: Above Average. Type: Light armor. Dexterity +3.

Blinking in surprise, he stared at the Hearth Mother. Losing the edge in her voice she simply smiled in understanding, “Please accept these gifts in the open spirit of reconciliation with which they were given. I must warn you of the danger to your mind I asked you about earlier, however. I am familiar with the immortal rebirth of higher level beings, though I have not heard of humans with this ability outside of the mightiest mages. While your rebirth will preserve you for the most part, it is still not without danger. You will be reborn in all but the most extreme conditions, but each time you die there is a chance you may lose your memories in addition to experience and skills. There is no specific rule as to when this happens. It does not happen frequently, but it is a serious reality which immortals must face. I have heard that the greater purpose you have in the life you live, the greater the chance you will come back to yourself. So live well, and may these gifts protect you and heal the damage between yourself and my people. ”

Hearing her words, Richter was indeed moved by her generosity, and felt much of his anger drain away. The discovery that he could lose his sense of self upon death however, was truly frightening.

As he started to equip his new armor, Sion came back with his old equipment in a brown sack, minus his clothing which Richter assumed was now only bloody strips and wolf scat. He dropped the items on the ground in front of Richter.

Looking at Richter, Hisako asked, “Will you finish the quest which you started? We will allow you to travel the forest either way, but this problem could well make the entire region unsafe before long.”

You have been offered the opportunity to cancel the Quest: Cleanse the Forest I. The Hearth Mother believes Sion has not acted honorably. As such, you will be allowed to hunt and travel on the lands of the Wood Sprites without aggression from them whether you finish you quest or not. Do you wish to cancel? Yes or No?

“I finish what I start,” Richter replied. “I will kill the wolves, but you need to know that I don’t think it will solve the problem. The wolves I fought were driven mad with disease. They were rabid. If we don’t stop the source of infection, these woods will be rampant with rabid wolves, bears and other predators.”

“Do you accept the responsibility to root out this evil at its source,” she asked.

You have unlocked the Quest: Cleanse the Forest II. It is clear now that some sickness has befallen the animals of the Forest of Nadria. Killing a few rabid animals will not correct this problem. You have been tasked by Hisako to figure out what is making the animals rabid. Reward: Increased regard from the Wood Sprites. Possible gifts from the Wood Sprites. Yes or No?

Richter had assumed that his quest was a chain when he saw the Roman numeral “I” after the initial quest. He wouldn’t stop now.

“I do,” Richter replied steadily.

Looking back to the newly returned sprite, Hisako’s eyes hardened again somewhat. “I cannot force acceptance into your heart, Sion. I know well why you might welcome the death of any human. This man is only responsible for the actions and drives of his own heart, however. I will not force you to accompany him again, but I encourage you to work towards clearing this dark mark from your life. Watching another in pain without offering aid is not our way. What will you do?”

A complex series of emotions worked its way across Sion’s face, but not much time elapsed before he answered, “I serve the Spirit of the Forest,” and he moved to stand beside Richter.

Sion the Wood Sprite has become your Companion. Companions will stay with you only as long your goals align.

Looking over the both of them the Hearth Mother said, “May the Forest shade you.”

CHAPTER 6



The two of them walked through the forest, both wrapped in silence as they dealt with their own personal demons. As they moved forward to the last place the wolves had been seen intending to pick up their trail, Richter noticed a small icon along the left side of his vision with Sion's face. Focusing on it, a translucent window popped up.

Name: Sion
Age: 44
Level: 7, 47% to next level
Health: 160 Mana: 150 Stamina: 120
Strength: 17
Agility: 18
Dexterity: 44
Constitution: 16
Endurance: 12
Intelligence: 15

Wisdom: 15
Charisma: 9
Luck: 12
Abilities:
Wood Craft
Forest Concealment
Skills:
Herb lore Lvl 3, 3% to next level, 91% affinity
Potions Lvl 3, 14% to next level, 88% affinity
Archery Lvl 9 71% to next level, 88% affinity
Imbue Arrow Lvl 4, 45% to next level, 75% affinity
Tracking Lvl 5 37% to next level, 93% affinity
Swordsmanship Lvl 8, 56% to next level, 81% affinity
Light Armor Lvl 4, 64% to next to next level, 65% affinity
Marks:
None
Resistances:
Life 10%
Earth 10%
Light 10%
Race: Wood Sprite
Reputation: Lvl 1 “Who are you again?”
Alignment: +2
Language: Sprite, Common Tongue

Interesting. Now that they were Companions, Richter could see Sion’s status page. He wasn’t sure what else being Companions meant, but he was sure the information would reveal itself in time. Most of the skills seemed self-explanatory. He had received the Light Armor skill himself after he had donned the wood sprite armor. Richter was extremely interested in the Imbue Arrow skill whatever that was. Focusing upon the skill brought up no further information. Resolving to ask the sprite about it later, Richter continued on.

They walked through the forest as the sun moved across the sky. When it began to approach the horizon, Sion stopped, examining an old spoor on the ground. Making eye contact briefly, he motioned and then led Richter deeper into the forest, leaving the river for the first time. After moving for only ten minutes they heard snuffling and growling noises up ahead. Slowly making their way through the trees, they climbed a hill and discovered what looked like a small cave opening. In front of it were three wolves. The largest was sleeping while the other two fought over a bone with a few scraps of meat upon it.

You have found: New Cave.

Reacting to some unknown stimulus, the larger wolf looked up and stared in their direction. Richter froze, his heart beating wildly as he prepared to fight, but the wolf simply continued to scan the woods before laying its head back down. The concealment properties of his new armor seemed to be coming in handy.

Congratulations! You have learned the skill: Stealth. Use your surroundings to avoid detection. Attacks made while stealthed cause extra damage.

Huh, Richter had been wondering when this skill would show up. Back to business though, the prompt had said it was a ‘New’ cave.

In the game, dungeons had been divided by the age. New dungeons were less than a year old. The progression was New, Young, Seasoned, Mature, Timeworn, Ancient and Primordial. After Young, each stage was ten times as old: a year, ten years, a hundred years and so on. The age was how long the creatures had been there. It was usually a marker of the difficulty and loot that could be gained. It wasn't exact though. A new cave inhabited by a grand lich would be more difficult than a seasoned cave filled with rats.

Sion motioned for Richter to shoot one of the smaller wolves while he drew an arrow and aimed at the larger one. The arrow seemed to develop a blue aura and vibrated perceptibly, almost as if it wanted to shoot off the string of its own accord. Nocking his own arrow, Richter took aim at the closer of the two wolves. Easing his breathing he waited for Sion, releasing his arrow only a moment after the sprite. The arrow streaked towards his target hitting it broadside. It collapsed to the ground. Hearing a faint boom he looked for the larger wolf, but saw only a red mist hanging in the air. Turning quickly back, he saw the uninjured wolf darting towards him. Richter dropped his bow, and drew his dagger just as it jumped towards him. Shoving his left bracer crossways into its mouth, he stabbed his

blade towards the wolf's stomach. It sank its teeth into the bracer, closing its jaws with bruising force, but was unable to penetrate the armor.

Richter's dagger sunk into the wolf's underside. He withdrew his blade and stabbed once, twice, three more times before it stopped trying to bite into him and fell to the side. As he pried the dead wolf off of his arm, he saw Sion approach the first wolf he had shot which was struggling to get to its feet, bloody froth on its muzzle. The arrow must have punctured its lung. Sion came up behind it and, quick as thought, slid his sword into its side. The wolf gave a soft exhale and lay still.

Cleaning his sword on the wolf's pelt, Sion motioned for Richter to follow him into the cave. The sprite kept his blade held out in front of him. Richter walked behind the small man his dagger at the ready. Just inside the mouth of the cave they found the larger wolf. They stepped over the carcass, a crater like hole in its side. This was clearly the result of Sion's first arrow. That blue aura was most likely the sprite's Imbue Arrow skill, Richter thought. Allowing a moment for their eyes to adjust, they saw the cave was shallow, and held nothing else besides the discarded bones of the wolves' kills. Richter was turning to leave, but saw Sion walking up to a patch of black moss

growing along the cave ceiling. Sion slowly ran his hand along the dark tendrils until it fell off in his hands.

“How did you do that,” Richter asked curiously. “I destroyed the plants that I tried to pick.”

“It is my Herb Lore skill. I doubt someone as large and clumsy as you could master it.”

“Try me,” Richter said with barely constrained irritation, “or are you still not going to give me your full support?”

“Fine,” the sprite said sharply. Moving to another patch of moss, he started again, speaking softer now, “You cannot simply take from nature, and expect a positive result. You must connect with the life and energy in the plant. With practice this become easier.” He was moving his hand along this second patch of moss while talking. “Once your energies are in sync, it is not you taking the herb from its place, but instead you moving a new part of yourself.” The moss fell away in his hand.

“There is no spoon, got it,” Richter mumbled. Walking over to a patch of moss deeper in the cave, he tried to see where he could grip it to peel it off. Placing his hand near a likely crevice he tried to pull the moss away.

You have picked up an unknown plant. Due to a lack of herbalism you have destroyed the plant. Why don't you try digging a ditch with those shovels at the end of your arms?

Gritting his teeth for the umpteenth time in since coming to this world, his mood was not improved to hear the melodic yet condescending tones of the sprite, "I said *connect* to the plant. Do not force it! Feel the energy inside of what you are trying to pick."

Moving to another moss, Richter stopped himself from ripping it off the wall in frustration. Calming himself, he placed his hand on it. He slowly ran his fingers along the length as he had seen Sion do. He closed his eyes and focused on the sensation of the soft, wet plant under his fingertips. For two hundred breaths, he stood there until he detected a faint echo. Strangely it was more felt than heard. Immediately focusing upon it, he strained to detect it again. For another several minutes he tried desperately to connect but felt nothing. Stopping to think of another tact he relaxed his mind and in that moment the echo was back again. Without focusing too hard this time, he willed himself to be open to the feeling. After a few moments, the moss simply felt more "alive." Placing his hand at what he now somehow knew was the right spot, he pulled lightly and the moss fell away from the cave wall into his hand

You have picked Dark Cave Moss. You feel this moss might make you sick if you ate it. You cannot detect anything else at your current level.

You have learned the skill: Herb Lore. You can now find useful plants with greater ease, identify, and pick them.

“Hmmm, not bad,” Sion said with a note of grudging respect.

“Is this used to make poison,” Richter asked.

“As with most things in nature it can be used to harm or heal.” Sion said with his reserved air. “Nature cannot be judged, and does not fall into petty roles of right and wrong… But yes, Dark Moss can be used to make poison.”

“Can you teach me how to create it?”

“It requires the skill: Potions. Before seeing you learn Herb Lore so quickly, I would have said it was beyond you, but perhaps. Let us cleanse the Forest, and then I will try to teach you at the Hearth Tree. Now reach those other patches of Dark Moss along the ceiling, and we will continue our hunt.”

Richter spent the next hour collecting moss, each time it was marginally faster to detect the resonance of life. He was able to collect four more Dark Moss, before the cave was picked bare. The

sun was almost setting when they exited the cave. Knowing they could not track effectively in the dark, Sion built a fire as Richter dragged the wolves' bodies several hundred away. There was no need to attract more predators overnight. Coming back, he found Sion already sitting in front of the fire. Agreeing to keep watch second, Richter laid down to rest.

The night passed without incident. In the morning, Sion examined the surrounding area, quickly finding the trail that the wolves had taken to arrive at the cave. Again the two Companions would be moving upriver. Looking at the useless pelts of the rabid wolves, Richter shook his head in distaste at the waste of life, before setting out after the sprite. He attempted to ask about the blue glow the sprite had made around the arrow, but Sion had cut him off saying it was not up for discussion.

Throughout the day, they found and killed eight more wolves, all with distinctive look of sickened animals. Once he had killed five, he was notified that he had completed his quest Cleanse the Forest I, and that he should return to the Hearth Mother for his reward. Even though Hisako had only asked for five wolves, his second quest, Cleanse the Forest II, required that he find out why the animals were getting sick so they proceeded onward.

The land grew progressively rockier as they moved upriver. They were also climbing in elevation as they walked closer to the mountains. The further up they went, the more pine like trees were seen. They had been walking in silence for several hours when Sion suddenly stopped. There was a look of severity on his face that Richter had not seen before. Taking a sniff, he looked at his human companion and quietly said one word, “Goblin.”

Looking back at the sprite, he mouthed back “Goblin?” Sion nodded once, and then silently melded back into the foliage. Richter moved to follow him into the denser undergrowth, leaving the relatively open space on the side of the river. It was easier to walk there, but made them a clear and obvious target as well. Stopping a dozen yards into the forest, Sion turned to Richter and motioned to him to wait. The sprite quickly climbed the tree they stood beside and disappeared into the leaves above. It sounded like the sprite moved along the branches to the next tree. Well that’s a new trick, Richter thought.

Waiting, Richter examined his immediate surroundings. As he looked down he found one plant had colors that were somewhat more vibrant than its surroundings. Reaching down he ran his hand along its length. It had yellow flowers that shot off to the sides and a

deep purple bud on top that had yet to open. As he slowed his breathing, he felt he could visualize all of it in his mind, not just the portion that was visible. He could feel the leaves, the flowers, and the roots. He made the connection, and again instinctively knew to loosen the soil lightly around it, grasp below the level of the flowers, and then twist and pull in a clockwise direction. It easily came free from the dirt.

Congratulations! You have advanced to level 2 in Herb Lore. Herbs are 3% more effective. Increased chance of finding higher level herbs.

Congratulations! You have found Tiger Lily. The colors of the flowers make you think of the pleasant heat of the sun.

Pleased with himself, he laid the Tiger Lilly to the side. Dismissing the screens from his vision, he once again decided to wait patiently. After about an hour, he heard a rustling above him and Sion dropped to the ground. He pulled a rusty knife from his belt, and showed it to Richter.

“I found a goblin scout. I was able to kill him quietly, but if there are scouts then there are others. Hopefully, it was just part of a hunting party from the Azergoth Swamp, but I do not like the timing of finding that foul creature while we are hunting these sick animals.

We need to hunt and destroy them, before they setup an encampment. Will you fight with me?”

You have been offered a Quest: Cleanse the Forest III. Sion suspects a connection between the sickness infecting the animals and the goblins. He feels that’s the two of you must kill the goblins that have invaded the Forest of Nadria. Reward: Increased relationship with Sion. A new Skill. Yes or No?

So the third link in the quest chain, huh? Richter had been expecting that the rabid animals were coming from a poisoned bog, or a type of insect that spread sickness. He didn’t really see how the goblins could be connected, but the fact that he had gotten another quest showed there must be some relationship. It also would be great to get a new skill, whatever that would be. Maybe he could even ask for a specific skill…

“I said I would help cleanse the forest and I will,” Richter replied.

“You must be stronger than you are then. The damage you can cause is not enough to overcome these enemies. We must come up with something else.”

“Can you teach me how you make your arrows explode when they hit?”

Sion shook his head. “That is a race specific skill that only the Sprites have. It was a blessing of the Forest, and the will of Nature. Humans cannot learn it.”

“That might not be a problem. I am not like every other human you have met. Just try.” Seeing Sion’s stubborn reluctance, Richter added, “Please.”

Sion took a deep breath and said, “I will attempt to teach the skill if you will swear never to use them against the Wood Sprites.”

“I promise you that as long as you and your people do not break faith with me, then I will be your ally.”

“I can accept that, now listen. You must imagine your mana flowing into the arrow. As in Herb lore, this is a partnership. Accept the arrow as part of you and let your mana flow into it. Use caution though! This skill can damage you as well. Once you have Imbued the arrow, the energy cannot be taken back, it must be released. The mana makes the structure of the arrow unstable. The more mana the greater the instability, the more powerful the strike, and the less time you have to fire. Waiting too long will make the arrow explode on the string. Do not wait too long to fire or YOU will suffer the effects of the explosion. Are you ready to try?”

Richter was suddenly a bit less eager to do this. It sounds like Sion was saying the arrow turned into a stick of dynamite, and he had to light the fuse and hope it didn't go off too soon. There was no denying the power of the Imbued attack, however. Stealing himself, Richter knocked his bow and tried to imagine his mana extending from himself and into the arrow. After long minutes nothing happened, however.

Seeing the difficulty, Sion said, "Imagine the mana as a field around your body, both imperceptibly thin and massively powerful. Feel that field surround the arrow, and once it does simply channel more power into the part of your aura that encompasses the arrow."

Trying again, he did as Sion asked. Closing his eyes, Richter let his other senses expand. He relaxed his mind as he did when using Herb Lore to connect with the life force of plants. Rather than trying to connect outward though, he allowed himself to gaze inward. After a time he felt he could see his aura as a deep gold with steaks of a rich black, like old gold streaked with ebony. Once the visualization would stay in his mind for more than a few moments, he tried extending this field to encompass the arrow. He held the image in his head until he felt a peculiar sensation of stretching, of suddenly

being a bit “more.” Opening his eyes he could swear he saw a gold tinge around the arrow for the briefest second.

You have learned the skill: Imbue Arrow. You can now imbue arrows with part of your mana to increase the damage of that shot. This is a subskill of archery.

Not wanting to blow up he quickly shot the arrow at a nearby tree, and ducked and covered his face. He didn’t hear an explosion, but did hear Sion laughing at him. “You didn’t actually put any mana into that arrow, Richter! You did manage to extend your aura, but next time let the mana actually flow as well. If it’s any consolation, I’m sure that tree over there is thankful! Hahaha!”

Richter looked at Sion expecting to see a disdainful gaze to go along with his teasing. For the first time though, he saw an expression other than contempt. It was there and gone too fast to recognize, but he would have sworn it was respect if he didn’t know that was impossible from the angry sprite.

“Imbue Arrow is a blessed skill of the Forest. The fact that you have been blessed to earn it may mean that you are not all bad. Either way, this was a good start,” Sion said. “We will rest here for the rest of the day. Practice your new skill, while I prepare some poison for our arrowheads using the Dark Moss.” Sitting on the

ground he pulled a small mortar and pestle from the pack he carried. Adding a small amount of water to the bottom of the bowl, he began to grind the moss. Looking up at Richter, the sprite wolfishly bared his teeth, “Tomorrow, we hunt goblins!”

CHAPTER 7



They left just before dawn, stalking silently through the forest. Richter found far fewer animals startled due to his presence since donning the Wood Sprite armor. Though he still made far more noise than Sion, he felt that he moved like a ghost through the trees. They had decided to follow the path he had taken to find the goblin scout, reasoning that this was probably the best place to start for finding the rest of the green skinned creatures. Looking around, Sion found the trail again. Motioning for Richter to proceed slowly, Sion climbed into the trees, and moved along in the same direction.

The air smelled clean with the scent of pine needles and the brief rain that had fallen the night before. As Richter moved forward his nose was filled with the comforting smells of nature. The sounds of the forest waking helped to calm his nerves, which had been on edge as they stalked a potentially deadly opponent. He made his way through the forest, trusting his small companion to stop him before running into anything dangerous. As he did, he noticed several plants catching his eyes. By this point he knew it meant they would be useful in some way. He had to pass them by regrettably, the need for speed was all important at the current moment. His appreciation for his new Herb Lore skill increased, however.

Slowly stalking through the forest for thirty to forty minutes, he came to a halt when Sion slowly dropped down beside him. “There are four of them up ahead, all scouts,” the sprite said softly.

Moving to the left, they circled around the area Sion had indicated. When they crossed a rocky outcropping, Sion indicated the goblins were on the other side. Looking around the corner of a small boulder, Richter got his first sight of goblins. Three and a half to four feet tall, each was clad in rags and ratty furs. They were green with greasy black or grey hair that sprouted in wisps plastered to their heads. Fangs protruded in either an overbite or underbite.

They each had a rusty dagger or small club. They were sitting around a fire roasting what appeared to be a large rat, bickering with each other.

Sion looked at Richter, “Give me a count to fifty while I move to the other side of them. Then power your arrow and hit the ugly one with the club.”

“I haven’t Imbued successfully yet,” Richter replied in a soft hiss.

“It’s time to man up then,” Sion said. “One day you might be good enough to sprite up,” he added with a smirk.

“Fine, let’s do this! But which one is the ugly one?”

“Exactly,” the Sprite said maintaining his expression, and then blended into the woods.

Clearing his mind, he waited patiently. After the required time had elapsed, Richter knocked an arrow, and extended his aura. Counting his heart beats, he tried to let his mana flow into the arrow and a golden hue began to surround his arrow flickering in and out of intensity. Taking aim on the goblin whose back was to him he let his air fly. His mana had not successfully filled the arrow! The gold glow went as soon as the arrow left the string, but luckily it struck the goblin in the back, the surprise nature of the attack magnifying the

damage. The goblin fell to the ground shrieking. The other goblins jumped to their feet, and began to move toward him.

A split second later, a blue streak struck the middle goblin in its now turned back with explosive force. Its chest exploded outward, and blood spattered on the ground in front of Richter. The blast momentarily disoriented the remaining two. A second arrow from Richter struck a goblin in the leg, while another blue streak ended the life of the last standing goblin. Sion rushed toward the remaining goblin with his sword drawn prepared to end its life.

“Wait!” Richter shouted.

With a sneer on his face, Sion asked “Why?”

“We need to know why they are here and how many there are. I can understand what it’s saying. We just need to get it to talk.”

“That won’t be a problem,” Sion said with a grim voice.

After they finally silenced the goblin, they looked at each other, daunted by the task in front of them. These four they had killed were simply the tip of the spear. A large company of goblins had made their way into the Forest of Nadria led by a goblin chieftain that the scout had only called “Big Red.” Richter’s comment that cinnamon was always troublesome was met by only a confused glance from

Sion. He shook his head. The ignorance of the sprite was causing him to miss out on comedic genius!

Sion had been surprised that the goblins had banded together. Apparently, the green skinned humanoids were naturally combative. Usually could not be held together in groups larger than eight or twelve before they fell to infighting. Occasionally however, a leader strong enough or viscious enough, rose to power and forced the minor tribes to band together. Apparently this Big Red had forced several smaller bands to serve him. The exact number they didn't know. Not for lack of trying or unwillingness of the scout to "cooperate." Large numbers were simply beyond the intellect of the goblin. His counting system was limited to one, two, lots and then "lots and lots." Apparently the goblin chief had gathered "lots," and was in the Forest searching a dungeon for an item of power so that he could then be strong enough to garner even more support.

The mystery of the rabid wolves was still that, but the goblin did reveal that there was a goblin magic user that worked closely with the chief. The scout hadn't been able to describe what type of magic he could employ, but Sion told Richter that goblin mages were often involved with death or dark magic.

Richter looked at Sion, “Do you have any idea where this dungeon would be?” The goblin scout has just indicated it was somewhere north of their location.

Shaking his head the sprite replied, “We are getting closer to the boundaries of the forest. The human Kingdom Yves lies to the several weeks journey to the west, the Serrated Mountains are a week’s journey north, the Azergoth Swamp is a slightly farther journey to the northeast, and the Fire Tip Mountains are to the southeast. My people do not come this far north normally. We prefer the deep forest. The goblin indicated it came from somewhere to the North and East, however. Let’s just start moving in that direction. If the band is as big as it says, I will find traces of them.”

Searching the bodies, they left the knives and clubs as useless. They did find 3 silver and 7 copper coins in various pouches however. Sion had no interest in coinage, and motioned for Richter to keep them. Tying one of the pouches to his waste, it somehow felt good to have money in his proverbial “pocket” again. Even if he did have to shake bits of goblin off of the pouch. This Georgia boy just might turn into a cut throat capitalist, literally.

When The Land had just been a game, one copper had been the equivalent of one US dollar. A silver was worth ten dollars and a gold

coin was a cool C-note. It meant he had just killed four people for thirty seven dollars. Richter wasn't sure that his mom would be proud!

Sion took the lead again, and they walked back into the forest. They kept the river in sight, but stayed to the deeper woods, reasoning that they could be running into more bands of goblins if they were moving in the right direction. While they had dealt with that band of scouts with little difficulty, Sion assured him that those would be the weakest of the opponents they would face.

As they walked, Richter continued focusing his aura around the arrow, but not trying to actually invest mana. He was extremely wary of Sion's warning of exploding his own arrows. The act of extending his aura was easier than the day before, but it still remained to be seen if he could perform under pressure. He wished for a moment, that he had more of the blue forest berries to help his concentration. After a moment of introspection and pride however, he decided he did not want to rely on anything small and blue to help his performance, at least not yet.

Throughout the day, they encountered a few more wolves which they quickly dispatched. Sion also detected a band of six goblins, thankfully before the creatures saw them. They decided to bypass

this group, and stayed concealed in the underbrush while they walked by. Four of the goblins looked like the typical scouts, but there were two slightly larger goblins in the group with rusty cutlasses and leather breast plates. Sion identified these as goblin warriors. Apparently they were stronger, meaner and slightly smarter. The two companions waited about ten minutes after the patrol passed before continuing on. Even though it was a small delay, they were both heartened by the proof that they were moving in the right direction. They made camp for the night at the base of a large tree, deciding to forgo a fire. The low lying shrubs combined with the natural concealment of their armor made detection extremely unlikely, and the night passed without incident.

Sion continued to lead the way for the next three days. Over that time, they noticed goblin patrols with increased regularity, always between four and seven strong. They stayed hidden in the trees each time until the goblins passed. It was slow work, but it did let him increase his stealth skill to level 3. It seemed strange to him that Sion did not have a stealth skill, but he assumed it must be because the sprite had a concealment Ability.

Early in the third day, Sion came back from ranging ahead and told Richter that he had found the main encampment. It was in a ruin

about fifteen minutes ahead. Moving slowly now that they were so close, they creeped closer until activity could be clearly heard. Climbing into a tall tree to the south of the ruin, they were rewarded with a clear view. The remains of white stone walls could be seen ringing a compound the size of a large town. Dilapidated dwellings made of the same stone could be seen scattered about with grass growing up unchecked. It was clear that whomever had lived here had been gone for decades if not centuries.

The village sat on a small plateau halfway up a large hill. Mountains rose high above the village to the north. Before the mountains, a waterfall fell down a cliff face creating a lake in the hills beyond the village. That lake in turn spilled down along its southern edge, creating a second waterfall that formed a small river. A second tributary came from the base of the hill. This small waterway extended back into the cliff face through a large crack in the stone. The two ribbons of water joined, and then traced their way back into the forest. Presumably the small river rejoined the larger one they had been following for the past several days.

Near the back of the compound rose an isolated and large shelf of stone. A rise in the land created an easy slope up to the stone ending in large cave face. Arrayed at the bottom of this slope was

where they found the goblin camp. Dozens of goblins huddled around campfires arguing, fighting, defecating and fornicating wherever they wish. Richter was no cryptozoologist, but it didn't *seem* like there were any girl goblins down there. Well, he thought, as long as they were making love on each other, they weren't making war on him so… play on playa! What was truly offensive was the smell. Even at a distance, the odor was staggering. It was like a pig farm and a frat bathroom had a baby, and then that baby ate expired Velveeta. Choking back nausea, he and Sion backed away into the forest again. They walked for several minutes, until finding a stand of close growing trees that easily hid them from view.

"How do we do this," Richter asked once they were safely away.

"There is no way we can fight that many at once. We must slowly whittle them down."

"How? Their patrols are already too strong. With the element of surprise, we can maybe destroy one or two patrols before they become wary, but that would still leave dozens of goblins."

"Do you want to quit," Sion asked.

"No! I have already told you I am committed to finishing this, but we need a good plan."

Sion looked frustrated, but did not offer an argument. They sat there thinking as the sun passed over head. No solution presented itself for long hours. Evening was approaching and Richter was getting up to relieve himself when, looking around the trees which hid them, several plants caught his attention. It reminded him of the Dark Moss.

“How much poison can you make, and how potent is it,” Richter asked.

Sion thought for a moment, “All we have with us is the Dark Moss. It causes weakness and dazes creatures when struck with an arrow coated with its extract. Even if we could shoot every goblin though, the poison would only kill the weakest among them hours later, and by that time the rest would be hunting us.”

“What if we got them to eat it? They had that massive pot cooking in the middle of their camp. If we could poison their food, it might give us the edge we need.”

Sion scratched his face thoughtfully, “Perhaps. But to make a truly potent poison I would need a few other ingredients. Let me search the forest. Stay here.”

After the sprite had disappeared into the greenery, Richter looked around and spent some time picking the few plants that caught his attention. He was ultimately able to pick three Arrowroot Flowers and two Forest Sage, which gave him feeling of stamina and health respectively. Afterwards he sat and focused upon his aura manipulation, trusting in his camouflage to protect him. A few patrols came close enough for him the hear them, but no one came close to his hiding place. Several hours passed as he meditated, awaiting his companion's return.

When Sion did come back to the copse of trees, night had fallen. The now familiar viscious grin was back on the sprite's face.

"I assume you found what you were looking for?"

"And so much more. Nightshade, deathflower AND shadowbane. We will melt those foul smelling interlopers from the inside out." With that pleasant image, Sion immediately took out his mortar and pestle to begin preparing the poison. Richter wasn't sure at first, but the bloodthirsty Disneyland reject was actually humming!

CHAPTER 8



Sion worked through the night and into the next day, storing his poison in small clay jugs covered in animal hide that he took from his pack. Richter looked doubtfully at the small quantity of poison being produced, but Sion assured him it would be enough. Finishing in late afternoon, the sprite sat back massaging his tired arms. Richter decided it was time to share the last of his plan, “Killing these lesser goblins, is probably not going to change much. We need to kill the Chief, and it seems reasonable to assume his magician may be responsible for the rabid wolves, so he will have to die as well. Those two need to be our goal above anything else.”

“While I was collecting the herbs, I was able to observe their camp. I never saw a red goblin come out, but when they all began eating a few goblins went inside the cave with bowls of food. All the other goblins ate after that. They were probably bringing food to their chief and his pet magician. We need to get the poison in their retched stew just before they prepare to eat their evening meal to catch as many of them as possible. There will still be the patrols that are out of camp. They won’t be sickened, but we will have a window to act. Now, it is time for you to tell me the last part of your plan. How do we get the poison into the pot?”

“Well,” Richter replied. “Depending on your perspective, this is actually the easiest part. The pot is right below a large tree. That tree grows out of the shelf of stone that cave is set in. The shelf is well covered with foliage and small shrubbery that leads all the way to edge of the encampment and into the forest.”

Sion nodded, being well familiar with the lay out of the camp.

“Now,” Richter said with a barely concealed smile. “When you climb out onto the tree branch…”

An hour later, Sion was still cursing the stupid human, and his own greater stupidity for agreeing to this horrible plan. As much as he wanted to plant an arrow in Richter though, he had not come up

with a better plan of how the two of them could kill more than fifty goblins. He moved along the escarpment not ten feet above the grunting goblins, hearing a mixture of common speak and their own guttural tongue. He moved slowly. Despite his justified faith in his concealment skills, one stumble or one loose rock would mean if his death. If they were able to subdue him rather than kill him outright… well it did not bear thinking about. Goblins were the racial enemies of the Wood Sprites, and tales of their savagery kept many a sprite child up late into the night.

Keeping one eye on the goblins, and the other on where to find his next hand or foothold, he moved along the rocky shelf until reaching the tree. He climbed up the trunk and then out onto its limbs, grateful for the added cover of the large leaves. He slowly crawled out onto the branch above the stew pot. Looking down, he saw too many eyes looking at the pot in anticipation, and dared not drop the jar of poison at this point. He and Richter had agreed that the return of a patrol would provide best distraction. Waiting on the tree limb, he attempted to ignore the burn from the fire 20 feet below, and removed the stoppers from both clay pots. As he slowly warmed, he vowed to repay the retched human for this. He had seen that poorly concealed smile on his stupid, large face!

Luckily, Sion did not need to wait too much longer. There was a clamor to the south of the camp as a group of seven goblins returned blathering loudly about whatever stupid thing they had found on their patrol. Sion had never before been happy about the inane babbling of goblins, but it worked to distract the rest of the camp for a few seconds! In those moments of misdirection, he dropped the two jars of poison he had prepared. He held his breath during the short fall, praying his aim was true. Success! Both jars dropped into the pot, and quickly sank thanks to the stones he had placed in each jar to increase their weight. Some poison had fallen out upon striking the surface of the soup, but luckily whatever vile ingredients the goblins had found to make their stew left an oily surface. The dark color of the poison he had prepared could not be distinguished in the firelight. He started the slow climb back to the safety of the forest, and began to curse that damn human again!

Sion made his way back to the stand of trees that had been hiding them for the last day with no problems. They waited for another hour, and then cautiously made their way back to the encampment. When they got there, they realized they could have broken every branch they found along the way, and they would not have been detected. The stench of the camp had been increased

five-fold. The bowels of every goblin there had been released from both ends, and almost all were on the ground groaning. Richter looked at Sion expecting to see another blood thirsty grin, but all he saw on the Sprite's face was grim resolve. "I take no joy in slaughter," Sion said arching his back and rolling his shoulders, "but I will not shy from it either."

They knocked arrows to their bows and began. It took very little skill to strike the goblins since they were barely moving targets. They had decided not to Imbue their first shots for several reasons. One, to keep the encampment from knowing their position as long as possible. Two, neither had enough mana to imbue the amount of arrows that were required. Three, Sion had coated all of their arrows with poison. Neither were sure they even had enough arrows, but thankfully Hisako had given then several dozen each prior to leaving the Hearth Tree. In the night, the arrows were nearly invisible. The *whsst* sound they made as they cut through the air could was not loud enough to attract the attention of the goblins. Not when each of the green creatures were mired in their own personal hell. At near point blank range, their shots struck necks and chests center mass. Apparently the goblins' sickness and position qualified some as helpless, because it seemed to Richter there were an inordinate

amount of critical hits. That coupled with the damage the poison had already done meant one arrow was usually enough to finish each goblin.

They killed ten, then fifteen more before the camp at large became aware of them. Even then the cries of alarm were ignored for a few critical moments, being mistaken for the already existing moans of pain. By the time there was a coordinated counter attack, they had killed more than half of the goblins, leaving between fifteen and twenty scouts and warriors. As the goblins began to move towards the two archers, Richter’s shots grew more erratic, some missing, others hitting limbs but few striking critical points. Sion though, was able strike three more, this time infusing the strikes with mana. The scouts smoking chests made clear that they would not rise again.

The first scout reached Richter, and he smashed it in the face with the end of his bow. Stepping forward to give Sion the time to make a few more precious shots, he raised his knife and slashed at the next goblin. It ducked, sending a viscous swipe of its own knife back at him. His longer reach kept the scout from reaching him with its blade, but several more were right behind it. A second scout moved in to his right and grabbed at his leg, holding tightly. With the

decreased mobility, Richter was not able to move out of range of the first and it dove towards him, the blade in its hand outstretched. It managed a shallow cut on his left leg. Hunching over slightly, he drove the pommel of his knife into the head of the goblin holding his right leg causing it to loosen its grip. At the same time he grabbed the other by the shirt and pulling it forward, easily off balance after its lunge. He quickly stabbed down into its neck causing a spurt of blackish blood, then whipped his blade at the goblin holding him. It went down wailing and holding its face. Seeing three more almost upon him he fell back. Scooping up his bow he turned to run, shouting in the Sprite's language, "Fade back to the trees, we will thin them there!"

A final blue streak shot right above his head, and elicited a squeal of pain behind him. Sion had been able to kill two others during Richter's brief knife fight. That left about ten on their feet. Furious expressions were on the goblins' faces. Running as fast as he could, he saw Sion join him on the right, the Sprite's legs pumping as quickly as possible. The run was dangerous and the slice of moon above only gave partial definition to obstacles they ran past. They continued on for a couple minutes easily increasing their lead on the sick goblins. Sion had found a clearing, and they had marked it as a

retreat point before they began their attack. Once it was in sight, Richter turned his head and shouted, “Go up in the trees. I’ll make a stand on the other side. When they run past you, start firing.”

Nodding Sion ran for another half minute and then jumped to a low lying branch, scurrying up into the tree with his uncanny swiftness. Turning back, Richter checked his quiver finding only two arrows left. This might be bad, he thought. Taking a deep breath he centered himself looking back in the direction of their pursuit, only a few moments passing before the first of the goblins became visible through the trees. Seeing their quarry again, they screamed in rage, their bloodlust giving them the strength to ignore the sickness from the poison, if only momentarily. Two scouts ran ahead of the others blind in their bloodlust.

Richter watched them approach, waiting for a clear shot, not releasing his first shot until the scout was only twenty yards away. Not wasting time aiming for a critical shot to the head, he targeted its chest. The arrow punched all the way through its chest, knocking it back several feet and it crumpled to the ground. The thing squealed out its last breaths, reminding Richter of the noise his uncle’s horse had made when it broke its leg in a rabbit hole. Pushing aside the horrible sound, he drew and knocked his last arrow. The shot fired at

a second scout at point blank range. It caught the arrow in its left chest, and its next breath turned into a bloody cough. Its momentum carried it forward though, the body crashing into him as it shook in its death throes. He shoved the small body to the side and stomped on its neck once. A sharp crack preceded the end of its pitiful cries.

Looking up he saw the remaining five, no six goblins coming within sight range in the waning light. Unfortunately there appeared to be three goblin warriors in the group. Unstringing his bow, he held the curved four and half feet of wood in one hand with his dagger in the other. Looking at the green skinned devils, black blood dripping down his face, the putrid taste of it having worked its way into his mouth at some point, his nostrils flared as he screamed, “Come on then!”

Screaming back with equal rage they move forward en-masse. As soon as they passed the tree that hid Sion, a blue streak shot down and pierced one warrior through the shoulder, the force of the blow tearing the goblin’s arm completely off. It fell to the ground screaming. Spurts of arterial blood escaped into the air as it felt in vain for its missing limb, its grim reality not yet setting in. In as many moments, a second and third arrow struck another soldier in the back and a scout in the head. It did not escape Richter’s notice that

the second arrow had barely any concussive force, though it did knock the warrior onto its face. The third arrow, while deadly, had no blue tinge at all. The sprite had finally run out of mana.

Having revealed himself, it was easy for the last warrior to target Sion. It threw its heavy dagger into the tree, and though Richter couldn’t see the impact he heard a cry of pain. The sprite’s body hit the ground with a thud, apparently stunned for a moment as he did not immediately get up. The dagger was sticking out of his shoulder. The warrior pulled an iron headed cudgel from its belt, and moved toward where Sion’s body had fallen. Not willing to let his comrade be executed, Richter started forward swinging his bow in a large arc at the three scouts that were converging on him. The first two ducked of the way, but he clipped the last, sending it spinning to the side.

In quick response, the first scout drove its dagger into the meat of Richter’s thigh, sending a blaze of agony through him. The second goblin swung a club into his chest, but thankfully the smaller creature lacked the strength to overcome the defense of his Chest Plate of the Wood Sprite. Grabbing the arm of the goblin that held the knife, he kept him from withdrawing its blade from his leg. He drove his own bronze dagger into its neck. The weapon was too weak to bite

very deep into the neck, but when he withdrew the blade it was clear he had struck a major vessel. More black blood sprayed across his face in a strong jet. A look of profound shock appeared on the dying goblin's face as it opened and closed its mouth quickly with only blood escaping.

As it fell it released its grip on the dagger, but that didn't help Richter. The damage was already done. 20% of his health was gone! His leg failed, causing him to collapse to the side. This might have been all that saved him. The third goblin that had been struck by the staff, and then forgotten in the ensuing melee, had gotten quickly back to its feet. It jumped towards him, but his sudden collapse caused it to miss. Richter and the two scouts landed together in a heap. With a short and strong surge, Richter pushed himself up on top of them plunging his dagger down again and again shouting his defiance, for a few seconds lost in the black haze of their blood, and his own pain and rage. Coming back to himself he remembered his companion and looked stricken in the direction of the goblin warrior expecting to see it holding a cudgel slick with the sprite's blood and brain matter. He could not have been more wrong.

Sion was on his feet. He and the goblin warrior went back and forth in a deadly dance. The sprite's thorn like sword darting in and

out trying to skewer the goblin as its cudgel swung in strong arcs attempting to crush the smaller fighter. The sprite's advantage was his speed, but he was clearly pained by the dagger sticking out of his shoulder. The goblin clearly had greater size and strength, but the poison must have slowed it down considerably as its motions seemed somewhat sluggish.

Moving forward to help his fallen comrade, he limped across the clearing as quickly as he could. Before making it halfway though, the fight concluded. Feinting forward, Sion immediately leaned back again. The overhand swing of the goblin's weapon just missed his head before it struck the ground solidly. In that half second of over extension, Sion again stepped into the goblins guard and almost delicately drove his sword up under its chin and up into its brain. He stared his fallen foe in its eyes for a moment while the light died in its eyes. He then withdrew his sword and stepped back, letting the body slump to the ground. The two Companions looked at each other, surround by a charnel house of their own creation. The imagery did not reach them though, both were still caught in the embrace of bloodlust and pain. The death and gore registered no more than a second place runner registered to a gold medalist at the end of a race. They were still standing. Breathing heavily through their pain

they looked each other in the eye, and Richter verbalized what was on both of their minds, “Let’s finish this.”

Both using Richter’s healing ring once each, it was enough to close their major wounds and stop the bleeding though they both still moved slower than before. They also both consumed Forest Sage, which Sion had confirmed was a basic healing herb. Retrieving what arrows they could, they hastened to get back to the encampment, and then up to cave upon the hill. They had not forgotten time was limited to kill the goblin chief before any patrols made their way back. Though the fight had been intense and painful, it had lasted barely fifteen minutes. If they did not waste time they might still accomplish their goal. Richter picked up a sword dropped by goblin warrior on the way back to the ruin. Checking it’s stats as he walked he was underwhelmed.

You have received: Crude goblin cutlass. Damage 7-8. Durability 7/12. Item class: Common. Quality: Poor. Weight 4.3 kg

It did supplement his bronze dagger however, which was down to a durability of 4/20. Arriving back at the encampment, they made their way through the bodies, quickly ending the lives of any of the goblins still breathing. There was one tense moment as a warrior that had been a feigning injury, turned quickly as they passed and

drove a short sword towards Richter's stomach. He knocked the blade aside with a bracer however as Sion stabbed it through the throat. Looking down, Richter spit upon its dead body, and then picked up the short sword.

You have received: Soldier's short sword. Damage 10-12. Durability 23/30. Item class: Common. Quality: Average. Weight 1.5 kg

"Thanks asshole," Richter said with contempt, dropping the inferior cutlass he had taken.

It didn't take long to reach the mouth of the cave. They both looked at each other wearily. Sion peered directly into his face saying, "We are now brothers in blood. Though I am not immortal like you seem to be, my soul is. If it is my time to rejoin the Universe, then I will do it gladly if it removes this threat to my people."

Nodding back, Richter said, "It is noble to die for your people, but I say, let's make these bastards die for theirs!"

A grin on his face, showing blood streaked teeth, Sion smiled back crazily. With that, they entered the darkness.

CHAPTER 9



“How much mana do you have left,” Richter asked.

“I’ve managed to recover about thirty five points. Enough to imbue two or three arrows or one very strong strike.”

Richter absorbed this information silently. At his current state, his Wisdom had only ten points. That equated to one mana point regenerated every ten seconds. Sion’s Wisdom had fifteen points, which would increase mana regeneration but not by much. The risks of waiting for full regeneration outweighed the benefits though, when those roving patrols of goblins were factored in. And so the two Companions made their way forward into what was clearly not a

natural formation. Though the outside looked like roughhewn stone, the inside of the cave, showed tight fitting blocks comprising a hallway of grey marble. Richter could only imagine that the opening, having been exposed to the elements, had eroded over time while deeper into the structure the original architecture had been preserved.

Their footsteps echoed as they moved forward. There was a sense of heaviness and age to the place. It was clear from the lack of trash and offal that not even the goblins had the nerve to disrespect this place. They listened intently, but heard no signs of life. The sun had set as they made their way back to the encampment, but it would not have mattered if was noon on a clear day. Sunlight had never reached the depths of these passages. Using a torch taken from the goblin encampment, they moved forward in a small sphere of flickering light, the entire rest of the world seemingly draped in darkness.

On they walked for several hundred yards, steadily going deeper as the floor sloped downward. After a final turn of the hallway, they walked into a large gallery. The ceiling reached a hundred feet into the air, and multiple hallways branched out irregularly from the roughly circular room. All of this was of less importance, however,

than the room’s occupants. They had finally found their quarry. In the middle of the room, there stood a large goblin with a reddish hue to his green skin. There was a second slightly taller figure reclining against a large mound.

The goblin chief was just over four feet tall and powerfully built. It wore leather boots and a tunic made of poorly sewn together animal skins. Over this was a chain mail shirt with a large rent in the side, most likely created when the chief had killed the previous owner. A large axe was by its side and buckler hung from its arm. It leaned heavily upon its weapon, and glared with all of the animosity its weakened body could afford it.

Its companion was five feet tall or would have been if it was not hunched over. It was covered in black robes. Dark splotches gave a matted look to the rough material in places, giving that blacker than black appearance that is only imparted by congealed blood. It had sickly mustard yellow skin and was completely bald. Its face was more human than the other goblins, but its beady eyes imparted the same malicious glare as the goblins. The deep wrinkles on its face gave it the appearance of old age. It held a staff in one hand with a small animal skull attached to the top and red veins of color glowing

up its black length, the color throbbing at the pace of a measured heartbeat.

“Hobgoblin,” Sion spat.

The mage nodded, the same smug smile on its face not changing. It was the chief who spoke in guttural but clearly understood common tongue, “Why are you here? Why has a human allied with this forest rat?”

“You are in the Forest of Nadria, filth,” Sion shouted back. “Answer instead why you, a fire goblin from the mountain tribes has come to sully this ancient place. What is your purpose?”

A raspy chuckle came from the hobgoblin. With a loud breathy whisper, sounding like the crumpling of old parchment, “Have you forgotten so quickly? Have your people forgotten so easily the Places of Power that exist in the world? We are here with a glorious purpose. To reawaken forces and corrupt them. We will cleanse the Forest of —*Urghk!”*

All Richter was aware of was blue flicker, and then the hobgoblin’s body was flying backward. Looking to his right, Sion shrugged, “I decided it was time to fight, not talk.”

Guess that makes me Eastwood, Richter thought with a grin, drawing his own arrow and firing at the goblin chief. The chief blocked with his buckler, clearly not easy prey like the dead goblins outside the cave. He drew again, confident that the two of them could overcome the sickened goblin, but then the mound that hobgoblin had leaned against turned around. Richter was suddenly staring into the bloodshot eyes and frothed muzzle of a rabid cave bear. You have got to be kidding me! That was Richter's repeating thought as he began to launch arrow after arrow at the bear. His short bow lacked to power to deeply penetrate the bear's body, unfortunately.

Richter dodged to the side as the bear took a swipe at him with its massive paw. It still caught him in the side though, and flung him several feet through the air. He landed hard, losing fifteen percent of his health from a glancing strike! Rolling with the blow, he regained his feet only to see an axe head swinging at him from the left. Falling on his backside again, he felt a brush of air on his face as the passage of the axe passed only a finger length over his head. Dropping his bow, he drew and threw his dagger in a weak underhanded toss towards the goblin chief's face. The buckler again moved to block the strike, knocking the projectile to the ground.

The distraction allowed Richter to regain his feet and draw his short sword. He began to swing his blade with an untrained, but furious barrage at the goblin chief. He had to hope that Sion could occupy the bear. The boom he heard from his right followed by a roar of pain and anger gave him hope for a respite from the animal. As he rained blows upon his foe, it was clear that the poison had taken a toll. A particularly heavy blow drove the chief down to one knee. Grabbing the buckler attached the goblin's right forearm, he pulled the chief forward off balance. The goblin fell to an awkward stance on all fours, one shoulder higher as it braced the buckler against the ground.

The goblin chief's prone position offered Richter the opportunity he needed. With his stamina lowered to 30%, he reversed his grip on the short sword and drove the blade down through the goblin's back. The two feet of blade penetrated the chainmail covering him and sank until only a few inches remained free. The red goblin shuddered and then died.

Turning to his right, Richter saw Sion running from the bear. The sprite was quickly losing ground. Scooping up the axe he threw it with all of his strength! The weapon was strangely unwieldy though, and only struck a glancing blow. It did pull the bear's attention

though, and it turned to lumber toward its latest aggressor. As it hobbled its way toward him, it was clear that it had suffered damage, but also was more than hale enough to still be able to cause him serious injury. Placing his foot on the body of the chief, he attempted to pull his sword out of its body. The sword was stuck fast in the body!

At his current rate of exhaustion Richter could barely muster the strength to continue. An arrow from Sion struck the bear in its hamstring causing its leg to collapse. Richter sighed in relief, the bear was only a few feet away when it dropped. Richter drew his battered knife and prepared for a last stand as it continued to crawl towards him. That was when he saw Sion lightly jump on its back and run swiftly towards its neck. With a sharp jab, the sprite plunged his sword into the crook of the bears neck and front leg. When the sword came out, there was a bright red spout of arterial spray. As its lifeblood spilled on the floor, the bear made a pitiful mewling noise and then finally collapsed.

Feeling exhausted, Sion looked to the up just in time to see a dark bolt of energy surging from the magician’s staff. The only cover available was the bear’s body. Sion fell to place the animal’s body between him and the hobgoblin. There was no great blast of force

like with the imbued arrows. Instead dark tendrils of magic crawled over the bear's body liquefying the flesh and causing large gobbets of meat to slough off. Richter picked up his bow again, and shot an arrow at the mage. The results were less than impressive. The arrow it bounced off an invisible barrier surrounding the black clad figure. The red light on the mage's staff began to throb faster and with more intense red color, looking like lava seen through basalt.

There could not be much time until the mage released whatever horrible spell he was building up to. Basic rule of thumb was that the longer a spell took to cast, the more powerful the result. This would most likely be no different. With no time to lose, Richter knocked another arrow, giving his complete focus on Imbuing it with his mana. After only a moment it glowed golden. He released, and this time the arrow maintained its shine as it streaked toward the mage. It too struck an invisible barrier but the extra force added caused the hobgoblin to stagger. Once it lost focus on the spell it was building, the light gathering at the staff's tip died. A second and possibly more important consequence, was the hobgoblin grabbed its head in both hands and shouted out in pain. The backlash from the interrupted spell must have been horrible based on its cries.

Knocking another arrow on the string Richter once again focused his magic in the arrow, pouring more energy than before. For one, then two heart beats, he held his bow at full extension as the golden glow brightened and black streamers seemed to cross over the golden shell, then he released. The resultant boom deafened both he and Sion momentarily. The mage must have lost the ability to maintain its shield with the backlash. The arrow flew unimpeded and then detonated on target. The chest of yellow skinned mage caved inward and a red mist appeared in the air. The staff fell from its outstretched fingers as its body was flung across the room.

The stench of blood, viscera and feces filled the room after the fierce fight. The two Companions stood looking at their vanquished enemies. Having given it their all they both stumbled towards the center of the room and the body of the slain goblin chief. Standing there above its body they suddenly heard raised voices and angry cries coming from the tunnel. It could only mean one thing. A patrol had returned!

Richter looked to Sion, “Run. I don’t have much stamina left to resist them, but I will be reborn if I die. You won’t.”

Grimly Sion looked back, “The only known way to the surface is the direction they are coming from. Personally I have no interest in

dying alone in the dark at the claws of some subterranean monster. I will stand or fall with a friend!” With that he stuck out his arm, which Richter clasped, each holding the others wrist.

Sion released his grip and said, “Now move quickly. We have one chance. Goblins are cowards at heart, and will always bow to those of greater strength. Take the axe and remove the chief’s head.”

Not wasting time asking more questions, Richter picked up the axe. Again it seemed somehow to want to squirm out of his grasp, but his control was sufficient for this task. He struck down at the chief’s neck, severing it in two strokes. Seeing a clear gem by the chief’s body, he also picked that up and put it in his pouch.

“Now pick up the head, and stand by me with the axe at your side.”

And so the Companions stood, awaiting the goblins as they noise of their approach grew louder. The sprite was covered in gore and blood, a large tear in his cheek where the bear had scored a hit upon him. The human was favoring one leg. The wound from his skirmish with the scouts had reopened during this latest fight. Richter’s green armor was bespeckled with blood, both red and black. Despite his exhaustion, he stood tall and held the chief’s head

by the hair. Drippings of blood making a soft *pat pat* on the floor beneath it as the head surrendered its remaining fluids. This was the sight that greeted the goblins that filed into the open space of the cavern.

Sion said in the common tongue, “This is our land! We will nourish it with your blood as we did the blood of your comrades! The Land is always thirsty!”

Richter followed in the goblin’s own tongue, “I have taken the head and axe of your leader. I WILL take your souls as well! This was not enough,” and with that he tossed the chief’s head to lie at their feet. Then shouted “Kill them!”

Sion released an arrow, bright blue with magic at the one warrior in the group, killing it instantly. Where he had mustered enough mana to Imbue another shot Richter didn’t know, but he was absolutely thankful! In the same moment, Richter ran at the remaining scouts screaming with the axe raised above his head. This was too much for the simple minded goblins. The group had just walked over the bodies of dozens of their people, and it had only been the strong will of the warrior that had propelled them forward. Seeing a blood drenched warrior running at them, they squealed and ran, dropping weapons behind them in their urgency to escape.

Richter chased them only to the edge of the chamber, before stopping and lowering the axe. The damned weapon seemed as much a risk to him as the enemy. As he watched the back of the last goblin turn the corner, a short gasp escaped him, followed by a loud grunt, and quickly followed by laughter. The type of laughter that can only come from the mouth of one who has passed through the shadow of death's domain and come out alive. He laughed to release all the tension he had accumulated through the dark day. He laughed in vain attempt to balance out the horror of the slaughter he had committed. He laughed at the ridiculousness that he could still be alive! As the peals of maniac laughter followed the goblin scouts, they ran all the harder, out of the cave, away from the ruins and into the forest. They met up with other patrols, and the fear in their faces, convinced those patrols to flee the forest as well. The goblins never fully rested until they had reached their marshy homeland. When they arrived, they passed along the horrible tale of the wild laughing demon that had slain so many of their people.

CHAPTER 10



As his mania left him, Richter slumped to the floor right where he stood. He barely noticed Sion coming and sitting beside him. The two leaned back to back, supporting each other physically as they had come to do in all other arenas of their interaction. For a while they simply sat. Neither could say how long had passed as they gazed at the bodies of the dead or simply gazed off into space, caught in their own musings.

Sitting there, Richter became aware of a slow blinking in the corner of his vision. He turned his head, but it remained stubbornly at the mid right aspect of his gaze. Puzzled for a moment, he finally

realized what is was, and allowing his vision to relax, he saw an icon like an unrolled scroll. Focusing upon it for a moment his vision filled with announcements.

TRING!

You have reached level 3! Through hard work you have moved forward along your path. As a Chaos Seed you gain 6 points to distribute to characteristics instead of the usual 4. You also get 25% advancement to the skill of your choice! Crush your enemies, honor your allies, LIVE!

TRING!

You have reached level 4! Through hard work you have moved forward along your path. As a Chaos Seed you gain 6 points to distribute to characteristics instead of the usual 4. You also get 25% advancement to the skill of your choice! Crush your enemies, honor your allies, LIVE!

You have either characteristic points or skill percentage points to allocate from the previous level. Now that you have progressed again, you must allocate your points within the next week or they will randomly be assigned for you.

You have completed the Quest: Cleanse the Forest II. Return to the hearth mother to collect your reward.

You have completed the Quest: Cleanse the Forest III. Return to the hearth mother to collect your reward.

Congratulations! You have reached skill level 3 in Archery. +2% bonus to aim. +2% bonus to damage.

Congratulations! You have reached skill level 4 in Archery. +2% bonus to aim. +2% bonus to damage.

Congratulations! You have reached skill level 1 in Swordsmanship.

Congratulations! You have reached skill level 2 in Light Armor. +2% to defense of all light armor.

Congratulations! You have received racial bonus Level I vs goblins. +3% attack and defense bonus when fighting goblins. Kill total 100 goblins to reach next level.

Your relationship with your Companion Sion has improved from distrust to friendly.

All of these status windows were wonderful news to Richter! They must have been accumulating since the initial attack on the sickened goblins, but were auto-minimized. Thank god for that! It could

certainly mean his death if a prompt blocked his view in the middle of a battle. What caused his eyes to widen and his mouth to run dry was the final prompt.

Congratulations! You have cleansed a Hidden Village. As owner of the Heart Crystal and because there are no living descendants to the previous owners, you may lay claim. Would you like to claim the village? Yes or No?

Richter's fingers started tingling as if he was already counting his riches. And why not? It was in his name. Focusing on the Yes option, he read the next prompt.

Congratulations! You have claimed your first village! You are now Master of the Mist Village. Your village is Level 1. As you increase the level of the village, more powers and resources will become available. This village is built upon a Place of Power. You now have access to the magics and mana associated with this particular Place of Power. There are many secrets to any location of Power, and you must apply yourself to discover and master them! Good luck!

Congratulations! You have won +700 fame points from founding a village on a Place of Power!

Richter's mouth dropped open in shock. How had this happened? He had woken up naked in the forest barely a week ago! He had only just reached level four! Now he had his own village? And the fame was nothing to sneeze at. In the game there had been two basic types of reputations: global and local. Local reputation would increase or decrease based on your interaction with a specific group. Global reputation as a term was a bit misleading. It did affect a broad amount of people or an entire region, but to affect another region there must be some connection between the two like a trade route. Reputation was not supposed to be a magic aura that just made people respect you more. Even though it didn't affect everyone in existence, global reputation was amazing nonetheless. It opened new quests, allowed for better treatment and better prices. It generally just made life more interesting. Unfortunately, the only way to increase global reputation was through fame, and it was almost impossible to earn!

Questions buzzed through Richter's mind, and first among them was:

"What's a place of power," he asked musingly.

"A Place of Power is a nexus of the world's ley lines. It allows for a magnification of those particular powers. Sentient beings can tap

into this," answered a deadpan voice. Somehow Richter could tell it put an emphasis on 'Place of Power' that he had not.

Before the second word was spoken Sion was on his feet, arrow knocked and drawn. Richter was only a moment behind him, dagger pointing out to cover the other half of the room. They looked frantically about, but couldn't see anything.

"Who is that," snapped Sion. Only silence answered his question.

"We both heard you! Who is there," Richter asked still looking for a potential enemy.

"I am the interface for your village Master."

"Where are you," Richter asked both exasperated and curious.

"I am present approximately one foot to the south of you Master."

"Why can't I see you?"

"My last Master did not want me to be seen so I remain invisible. Would you like to see me, Master?"

"Yes," Richter replied scanning the air directly in front of him. "Show yourself."

A gray sphere phased into view directly in front of its face. Its surface rippled like water, and it appeared lit from within, a steady glow and faint glow being cast from its center.

“Gah,” Richter exclaimed jumping back. “Not so close!”

“Yes, Master,” the sphere said moving back several feet continuing to hover in the air.

“What are you,” Richter asked, fascinated by its appearance.

“I am a remnant. An echo of the personality of the first chamberlain of this village. He was a powerful user of magic, and served the first ruler of this Place of Power. Together they built the Mist Village. At the end of his life, the chamberlain imparted intent to a fragment of his immortal soul. He tied it to this place to help guide future Masters.”

“How long ago was that?”

“My initial activation was 3,543 years before the removal of the gods from The Land.”

That’s impossible,” Sion said, his tone clearly conveying his lack of trust of the floating orb. Of course, who the hell would trust a floating talking orb? “What do you want?”

Again the orb floated in silence.

“Why do you only answer me,” Richter asked.

“You are the Master of the village, and I will only respond to your commands and questions. This was the policy of the last Master. It was thought to allow otherwise could compromise the safety of the village.”

“Well I command you to talk to and answer Sion.”

“As you wish. My goal is to aid my Master in any way that I can.”

Staring at the globe, Richter huffed, “What I really need are these bodies collected.”

“At the current level of the village I can summon ten basic worker constructs. Should I proceed?”

Not really expecting an answer to his complaining, Richter was pleasantly surprised, “What do you mean summon?”

“You are the Master of the Mist Village. Being built upon a Place of Power, the village, and by extension you, have access to a certain amount of mana every day. As the level of the village increases, your access to mana will increase as well. Basic worker constructs cost 100 mana to summon and each will last one day. You currently have

access to 1000 mana maximum. As Master you have access to all of these options, though many will not be available until the level of the village increases. You simply need to access the interface."

Richter relaxed his gaze in a now familiar way. Seeing a new icon in the shape of a small cluster of buildings he focused upon it. Immediately a crowded screen occupied his view. A series of pulldown menus were present,

Enchantments, Summoning, Population, Income, Mana Generation, Defenses, Global Relations, …

and a host of others. Staggered by the amount of options, he simply focused upon Summoning. More pulldown options presented themselves, most grayed out and illegible. At the top however was:

Mist worker, Lvl 1. Health: 50/50, Mana 0/0, Stamina 400/400. Able to perform simple tasks of menial labor. Cost 100 mana. Cooldown: N/A. Lasts 24h. The mist-like properties of your constructs halve all physical damage.

"You can summon these creatures," Richter asked.

"I can only do as you will, Master. If you instruct me to do so, I will implement your will."

“Very well. Sion and I have to go back to the home of the Wood Sprites. It may take me several days to return. You have permission to summon these things daily. All of the dead bodies should be stripped of weapons, armor, and items. Take the bodies outside of the village and burn them.”

“The ley lines which run through this village are strong in Water, Air, Dark and Life. I have no access to Fire magic however, Master. The workers can do everything you have instructed except light the bodies on fire.”

Richter looked at Sion, “I know you are eager to return home, but we need to take care of these bodies first. We could also use a rest. If I leave these bodies to fester, they will spread disease and pollute my new home.”

The Sprite nodded, “Even though they were goblin filth, we do need to deal with the dead. As you have helped me to cleanse the forest, I will help you to cleanse your new home.”

Nodding Richter turned back to the remnant, “What is your name?”

“I have none, Master.”

“What was the name of the mage that created you?”

“His name was Futen Windspeak.”

“Then I will call you Futen, if you like.”

“As you wish Master,” Futen replied in the same deadpan voice. It might have been Richter’s imagination but it seemed that for just a moment, the grey sphere glowed a bit brighter.

“And enough of this Master business. That kind of thing could go to a man’s head. Call me Richter.”

“As you wish, Lord Richter.”

Opening his mouth to correct Futen, he closed it again merely shaking his head slightly. Not worth it. Besides, ‘Lord Richter’ sounded pretty good.

“Summon the workers Futen.”

Light grey mist rose from between the cracks in the stone floor. Initially it was just a shapeless cloud one foot off the ground. It then began to pool in ten different spots in the chamber. The mist slowly rose taking on vague humanoid shapes. Each figure grew distinct but remained faceless. They had no clothing and no sex organs. Under the skin of each figure were slow moving swirls. The end of each arm was a round mist filled sphere.

“How will they accomplish anything with those blobs for hands?”

“They can fit any form desired Lord Richter. Please attend.” And so saying one worker raised its arm and the sphere became a hand, then a hammer, then a shovel head, before returning to sphere.”

Impressed by the versatility of the workers, Richter nodded. “Have them begin separating the bodies from their items. But put those two aside,” he said gesturing to the chief and hobgoblin. “Now, we need a safe place to rest.”

“This room will be safe my lord. The workers, though not strong, will delay and alert any attack from above, and no creatures of ill intent from the depths can cross the Great seal in the floor you are standing upon.”

Nodding wearily, Richter sat down against the most comfortable surface in the chamber, which happened to be the body of the dead bear, just not the liquefied part of course. Sion sat heavily beside him, the least graceful he had ever seen the sprite. Closing his eyes, Richter’s second to last thought was, ‘this is one messed up teddy bear,’ followed quickly by him verbalizing, “Wait! What creatures from what depths?”

CHAPTER 11



A heavy bladed axe plunged out of the dark as he fought a losing battle. Stabbing and swinging his sword, he fought as hard as he could. Again and again the axe gouged into his skin eliciting blood and pain with each blow. He collapsed. Looking up the goblin chief's face that was peering down at him, the monster raised its axe to strike one last time, and sever his head…

Gasping, Richter stood swiftly, knife in hand, blinking away the terrors of his dream. After a while he was able to slow his breathing but his heart still hammered wildly. He may have done what was needed the night before, but he was still a twenty four year old man

from a modern world. Until last week he hadn't done anything more violent than punch the occasional frat boy that had gotten handsy with his female friends. As he became more aware of his surroundings, he realized Sion was also up with an arrow nocked looking for the threat. Closing his eyes for a moment, he collected himself, before opening them again and looking at Sion. "There is no danger my friend. None outside of my own nightmares."

Sion looked at him, relaxing the draw on the bow. "Yesterday was a dark day, and I think better of you that it could not be so easily dismissed." With a pause of his own and then a small smile, he added, "My friend."

Judging by the weariness he felt, they had only dozed for a few hours. The torch had gone out while they were sleeping, but some faint grey illumination filtered down from an unknown source in the ceiling. Richter heard the sounds of activity outside of the cave. There was no way he could go back to sleep right now so he turned to Sion and said, "Let's see what we have."

Richter walked over to the goblin chief's body. He felt his gorge rise at the mix of smells: copper and nickel from the blood, sour stench from body reek and the nauseating reek from the feces that had escaped in death. Though he had ignored these in the heat of

battle, faced with the harsh reality after a night's rest he was doubly glad for the workers who would clear the other bodies.

Searching the goblin he first picked up the single headed axe.

You have found: Magic Iron Axe. Damage 15-20. Durability 33/35. Item class: Uncommon. Quality: Average. Traits: Unknown. Requires Strength 17.

Richter had not seen a requirement for weapons before. He could only assume that was because no other items he had acquired had requirements. Or maybe he had met the requirements so they hadn't been shown. Either way it did explain why the axe had seemed to resist him the night before. He also did not know how to identify the axe. He set it aside for now. Stripping the rest of the armor he looked at each before setting them aside.

You have found: Wooden Buckler. Durability 8/30. Item class: Common. Quality: Average. Defense +4.

You have found: Iron mail shirt. Durability 16/50. Item class: Common. Quality: Poor. Defense +9. Weight 9.1 kg.

You have found: Hardened leather pants. Durability 8/20. Item class: Common. Quality: Poor. Type: Light Armor.

You have found: 28 silver and 41 copper.

You have found: poor quality garnet.

Moving over to the hobgoblin, Sion had already stripped it of its belongings, and had laid them upon the ground.

You have found: Novice black mage robes. Defense + 5 (additional +7 vs magical attack). Durability 2/20. Item class: Common. Quality: Above Average. Weight 3.5 kg.

You have found: Magic staff: Attack 13-16. Durability 19/20. Item class: Rare. Quality: Above Average. Weight 4.2 kg.

You have found: Magic bracelet: Durability 10/10. Item class: Uncommon. Quality: Above Average. Weight 0.3 kg.

You have found: 11 silver and 24 copper.

You have found: Unknown potion x 2.

You have found: Unknown potion

“I’d be a lot more excited if I could identify any of this stuff.”

“I can help with that,” said Futen, materializing just to the side of Richter’s face.

“Aggghh! I swear to god I’m going to put a bell on you if you keep surprising me like that!”

“It was not my intention to frighten you, Lord Richter.”

“I’m not frightened. Nobody said frightened. I’m just, startled! When you are approaching me become visible a couple feet, let’s say twenty feet, away! Understood?”

“Yes, Lord Richter. Would you like my help?”

Thinking he heard a bit of attitude in its flat voice, but then assuring himself that was impossible, Richter replied, “How can you help?”

“Normally to identify an item, you must use a spell or item. Alternately you can take it to a magical college or temple to have a magician or priest uncover its true identity for you. I have the ability however, to identify all but the most powerful of items. I can do this now if you wish.”

“Can you teach me,” Richter asked eager to have this power.

“I am aware of your Limitless ability my lord, but that can only be applied to skills. As this is an ability it would not apply, and I know of no way to teach abilities.”

Trusting that if there was a way to teach abilities, the remnant would have at least heard of it over the thousands of years of its existence, Richter let the matter drop. Before asking Futen to use his

ability however, a thought occurred to him. “How do you know about my Limitless ability?”

“I possess a skill called Analyze. It allows me to know in depth information about creatures.”

“So that is something I can learn! Do you have any other skills?”

“At this time I am only aware of the one ability and one skill that I have told you about Lord Richter. As I have only recently been awakened by your claiming of the village, my memory is highly fragmented, however. It is entirely possible that as time goes on I will remember more. Also if the village raises in level, then I may have access to further powers.”

Nodding Richter said, “Let’s identify these items then. Afterwards you can teach me your skill.”

The light within Futen flared white, and suddenly the information was given to Richter in a series of prompts.

“How is it I suddenly have this information, when you are the one who has the skill,” Richter asked.

“You are the Master of this village. As long as we are close to one another, I can give you information without verbalizing. As the village grows, the distance we can interact over will grow as well.”

Impressed again at the versatility of this unasked for helper, Richter focused on the item information.

You have found: Staff of Decay: Attack 10-12. Durability 19/20. Item class: Rare. Quality: Above Average. Weight 4.2 kg. Traits: +4 Death damage. Has 5% chance to cause rapid decay upon target from direct strike or when channeling Death magic. Requirement: Alignment -2 or below.

You have found: Bracelet of Health: Durability 10/10. Item class: Uncommon. Quality: Above Average. Weight 0.1 kg. Traits: Increase maximum Health by +50.

You have found: Minor Mana Potion x 2. Taking this will restore 40 mana points over 6 seconds.

You have found: Minor Health Potion x 1. Taking this will restore 40 health points over 6 seconds.

You have found: Iron axe of Strength. Damage 15-18. Durability 33/35. Item class: Uncommon. Quality: Average. Traits: +3 to Strength. Requires Strength 17.

Remembering the black sludge that had come off the bear from one Death spell, Richter shuddered thinking of what would have happened if the staff's special ability had struck him. Telling Sion the

properties of each, the sprite spit on the floor upon hearing of the staff's true identity. "We should destroy this evil thing. For some reason I can't stand the sight of it!"

"How," Richter asked. "Do I snap it over my knee? I somehow don't think that would work."

"Unfortunately we most likely do not have the strength, and even if we did, it is not wise to tamper with the inner working of magical objects without the proper knowledge. Will you bring it back to the Hearth Tree so that the Mother can dispose of it?"

You have been offered a Quest: Destroy Evil's Weapon. Sion has had an extreme reaction to this staff. He hates it so much he can only think of destroying it. He wants your help carrying it back to the Hearth Tree so that Hisako can destroy it. Reward: Unknown. Yes or No?

Richter barely gave it a thought before nodding his assent. Though he and Sion had a rocky start to say the least, the sprite was a comrade. He would trust his Companion's judgement. Focusing on what was in front of him, Richter looked at the axe wondering at the strength requirement. He had already used it to sever the chief's head. It just didn't make logical sense to him that a simple item had a requirement. Picking it up, he took a practice swing, and felt

immediately off balance. Taking a few more, he stumbled disoriented. The last swing came dangerously close to cutting Sion. In the face of the glare he received from the diminutive man, he sheepishly placed the axe back down on the floor. Well, no point arguing with the facts. This axe was just not for him.

The sprite had shown no interest in loot, but Richter remembered the large amount of damage the thrown warrior's dagger had caused. Picking up the bracelet he handed it to Sion. The sprite initially looked like he would refuse, but Richter said "You are a great warrior my friend, but I seriously doubt this will be the last battle we are in. You have to grow stronger and survive. This will help." After a small protest, the sprite thanked him and slid the bracelet on his arm up to his bicep. He immediately stood a bit taller, and it seemed he had somewhat greater tone and definition than a moment before.

Placing the money in his pouch, Richter took a second pouch that had belonged to the hobgoblin and slid the potions into it. Picking up the staff, he felt revulsion. It was like holding a writhing snake. He dropped it quickly. Cutting a length of cloth from the hobgoblin's clothes, he wrapped it around the staff, which greatly lessened the feeling of revulsion. Turning to Futen he said, "Have the

workers collect all of the other items and lay them aside. I will review them upon returning from the Hearth Tree."

"Is there anything else you would like to have done, my Lord?"

"I need to know what other resources there are available. I need to know what we can use to build the village."

"I will search the boundaries of the village and this level. I can go no further than what you have laid claim to my lord. You will need to explore and vanquish any enemies in the lower levels if you wish to know what other powers, and riches may exist in the catacombs."

That had been the answer to Richter's question before sleeping. Apparently, the Place of Power was home to monsters. Through the millennia, creatures of various types had filled the underground levels. It was unclear if the Place of Power had created the monsters or if there were other entrances to the underground levels and they had moved in. What was clear was that the catacombs under his feet were not safe. The chamber they were in, which Futen had called a "Great Seal" stopped any monsters from coming up from the catacombs below.

"Well then the only other obvious point," Richter said, "is that it's a bit grandiose to call this pile of rocks a village? Can the worker's

build some houses, and clear away some rubble?”

“The workers are only the most basic of creatures, my Lord. They will follow any direction, but only exactly as it is given. They lack any real intelligence. Complex tasks, such as building a house will be beyond them.”

“Very well, have them gather stones and sort them by size and type into different piles. Also have them chop down trees that have grown inside the boundaries of the village and stack them. Finally have them dig a trench around the area outside of the boundary of the village.”

Turning to leave, a last thought occurred to him. Pulling out the clear gem he had taken from the goblin chief’s body, “What is this?”

“That is the Heart Crystal my Lord Richter. It is the embodiment of your dominion over these lands and the source of your connection to the village.”

“Does that mean if someone takes it from me suddenly they own the village,” Richter asked with some alarm in his voice.

“In its current state yes, but you can bind the stone to you. In this way it will be tied to you and your bloodline. You will also gain the powers inherent in the crystal.”

“What powers?”

“Each Place of Power has certain characteristics depending on the composition of ley lines that creates it. As I stated before, this village sits upon a strong collection of Air, Water, Dark and Life ley lines. Binding to the Heart Stone will tie your soul to the Place of Power. By fulfilling certain requirements you will obtain mastery of each of those powers in turn.”

Tied to his soul huh? That didn’t sound creepy or ominous at all! The other option was to lose this village to the first thief that took the Heart Stone though. After a few more moments thought, Richter asked, “How do I do it?”

“Simply will it my Lord.”

Focusing upon the gem, he stared into its depths. He suddenly felt that he was being pulled into the stone, though he did not actually move. A slight tingle played across his skin. The sensation became focused upon the inside of his left wrist. He realized with a start that the Heart Stone was gone.

“It is done,” the remnant said its deadpan voice.

Looking at his wrist, Richter saw a silver grey circle on his inner wrist where the strange sensation had focused. It had a swirl of grey

smoke within its boundaries that seemed to move slightly as he stared at it. After a moment the mark faded from view. He knew somehow he could summon it back if he desired.

You have received a Mark: Master of the Mist Village.

Making their way out of the tunnel, dawn seemed to be just breaking. The workers had not be idle. There were three piles at the base of the hill leading from the cave, one of items, one of weapons and the other of armor.

Richter was about to ask Futen to call a worker over, but he remembered what was said about the village being an extension of himself. Focusing on the nearest worker, he willed it to come closer. It promptly left its task and came to stand before him. Smiling, he said, “Futen, how do I Analyze the worker?”

“Yes my lord. You must gaze upon it. Focus until it becomes the only thing that exists. See past the external to the internal truth. This attention will draw its information to you.”

Focusing upon the worker, he stared intently at it. Richter looked at the light grey swirls that slowly moved under its skin, the clear lines of its arms, head, torso and legs. He gazed at its shapeless face and suddenly just knew!

You have learned the skill: Analyze. Cost 5 mana. You will be able to know information about other creatures simply by looking at them. The greater difference in level between you and the target, the less effective your skill may be.

Mist worker, Lvl 1. Health: 50/50, Mana 0/0, Stamina 400/400.

"I was able to do it Futen, but the information is pretty basic."

"Yes my Lord. You will have to increase the level of the skill to obtain more information."

Pleased nonetheless, Richter let the worker return to its duties.

The bodies had been dragged outside of the boundaries and placed within a pit the workers had dug. Grabbing a few waterskins from the pile of items. He removed the stopper from each pouring out a small amount of the contents. The first appeared to be water as expected. The second he quickly cast aside deciding not to ponder what the vile contents could be. The third however appeared to be oil. Moving over to pit he poured the contents over the bodies. Striking flint, Sion lit one of the torches from the goblin camp and then cast it into the pit. After a short time, the flames were licking eagerly at the naked green forms. Giving one last order, Richter said,

“Once the bodies are consumed, fill the pit with dirt again. I don’t want to be reminded of these creatures.”

“Is there anything else I can do, my Lord?”

“Don’t hesitate to advise me if you have something useful to say. Do your best to take care of the village and me. I want to be made aware of any major decisions, but in my absence do your best to protect and grow the village.”

“It will be done my Lord,” answered Futen’s deadpan voice.

Richter and Sion began their trip back to the Hearth Tree.

CHAPTER 12



The journey back to the home of the sprites was without incident. After several days of moving through the forest they were greeted by the sight of the golden grasses of the glade. The Hearth Tree loomed in front of them. As before, the Hearth Mother seemed to know they were approaching and waited for him at the edge of the grass.

She smiled at him with a look of contentment and peace.

Richter smiled back, and nodded his head slightly, “I have finished my quests. We traced the sickened animals to a goblin camp. There was a hobgoblin necromancer who was responsible. It

gave the mage control over them somehow. I do not know how, but the important thing is that it's dead. The danger has passed."

"I greatly appreciate all of your effort, and for bringing our warrior home safely. In addition to your reward I will give you a word of caution. Though those creatures were evil, it does not make them things. Robbing other creatures of their identity or gender may ultimately rob you of you goodness."

You have received 1,000 exp for Cleanse the Forest I

You have received 3,000 exp for Cleanse the Forest II

You have received 6,000 exp for Cleanse the Forest III

TRING!

You have reached level 5! Through hard work you have moved forward along your path. As a Chaos Seed you gain 6 points to distribute to characteristics instead of the usual 4. You also get 25% advancement to the skill of your choice! Crush your enemies, honor your allies, LIVE!

TRING!

You have reached level 6! Through hard work you have moved forward along your path. As a Chaos Seed you gain 6 points to

distribute to characteristics instead of the usual 4. You also get 25% advancement to the skill of your choice! Crush your enemies, honor your allies, LIVE!

You have either characteristic points or skill percentage points to allocate from the previous level. Now that you have progressed again, you must allocate your points within the next week or they will randomly be assigned for you.

You relationship has improved with Wood Sprites from neutral to friendly.

"We have made these while you were gone. I hope that they serve you well." Two sprites came forward, one holding a bow, the other holding a helmet and gloves. The bow was a beautiful chestnut recurve. The handle looked like deer hide. The ends of the bow curved back forward. Delicate carvings of leaves extended up both ends of the bow. The gloves were the same pliable yet tough green material of the armor he already had. Silently, Richter reached out and took the weapon and armor.

You have received: Spritely Helm. Defense +5. Weight 2.1 kg. Durability 30/30. Item class: Uncommon. Quality: Above Average. Type: Light Armor. Vision increased by 25%

You have received: Gauntlets of the Wood Sprite. Defense +4. Weight 1.3 kg. Durability 25/25. Item class: Uncommon. Quality: Above Average. Type: Light Armor. Ranged accuracy increased by 25%

Congratulations! You have obtained an entire set of matched armor: Sprite Armor. Defense given by each piece increased by 25%. Special Bonus: 50% less noise made while moving through forest.

You have received: Recurve bow of the Wood Sprite. Damage 14-19. Durability 35/35. Item class: Rare. Quality: Superb. Weight: 3.8 kg. Traits: + 8 Dexterity. + 5% accuracy. Provides the subskill: Focus.

You have learned the subskill: Focus. By expending stamina you can zoom in on your target making shots easier. This is a subskill of Archery.

Taking a firm grip upon the bow, he sighted upon a branch at the edge of a clearing. He invoked his new skill, and the branch zoomed into his view. By a guess it was 2x the original view. As he held the increased view, he was aware of his stamina bar decreasing. At its current rate, he would completely exhaust his stamina in about 30 seconds. As the bar got closer to empty, he felt the dizziness and exhaustion that he had felt at the end of the fight with the goblin chief. Releasing Focus, the bar began to replenish slowly. After a few

moments the feeling of disorientation began to abate. A wonderful new skill, but possibly dangerous if overused in the heat of battle.

Bowing his head Richter said, “These are gifts beyond measure. How can I repay you?”

“You have aided the Forest. This is the purpose of our clan, to serve its will and interests. Now speak no more of it,” she said with a soft smile. “There is something else we need to discuss. You may have noticed our Hearth Tree is larger than the surrounding forest.”

Smiling wryly, Richter said, “Yeah, it’s a little hard to miss.” The tree was the size of a small highrise!

“I am the Master of this Place of Power,” Hisako said, “and as such I can recognize other Masters. Our Powers are of Life, Earth and Light.” Holding up her left wrist, a small circle appeared. While Richter’s was silver and filled with mist that slowly swirled, the Hearth Mother’s was deep green with the figure of a tree. The branches seemed to wave in an unseen wind, the leaves gently shifting. Somehow feeling it was the right thing to do, he held up his left wrist, and his Mark appeared as well.

“Thank you for showing me trust,” she said with a smile. “Your Mark will be hidden from most, but any Master of a Place of Power

will be able to identify you if they get close enough. There is a glow in the center of the eyes, you can see mine if you look. Be careful of this. Being a Master means that you have access to power. Power that other's will take if they can. You are now a player in the great game, but you are a target as well. Invest in the growth of both your village and your own power. Create a meaningful community, and be careful who and what you allow in. The decisions of today can bear fruit centuries in the future."

Smiling at her motherly tone, he thanked her for her advice. "I need people for my village, and I need to sell the skins, and other treasure that I have found. I plan on traveling into the Kingdom of Yves. Hopefully there I can find a buyer for my goods, and settlers who are willing to come with me for a fresh start."

"Hmmm, that is the closest human kingdom, and you can find almost anything there. Tread lightly when you go. I do not know what humans are like in your world, but here, while they can be generous and kind, they are often petty, greedy and cruel. I would not easily tell anyone that you are a Master, or where your village is located exactly. And as I said, Masters can recognize each other. You should stay away from the palace or other halls of influence."

"Is every settlement built on a Place of Power," Richter asked.

“No, but most settlements that have grown to prominence, did so because of the strength of their Powers. I have not been into the human lands for more than a century. The capital city of Yves is called Law. It is built upon a confluence of Fire, Water, Earth and Air. Most places of power that are taken over by human settlements have a balance of their forces. It may be because they have an equal likelihood to serve Good or Evil.”

“Huh, so be careful, everywhere I go is dangerous, and I’m now a cosmic target. Is that basically it,” Richter asked.

The hearth mother walked closer and motioned for Richter to kneel down. He took a knee and looked her in the eye. That was when she slapped him in the side of his head. He really needed to start being careful of letting small beings within striking distance.

“Don’t complain. It could always be worse, and nobody likes a cry baby,” Hisako said.

Sion chuckled behind him, and said under his breath, “Rookie.”

Flaring his nostrils, Richter exhaled a deep breath, then gave a chuckle himself. “Yes ma’am.”

Standing back up, he turned to Sion. “Well my friend. I will miss your company.”

The sprite smiled at him, “No you won’t. I’m coming with you.”

With a half-smile on his face Richter asked, “Are you sure?”

In a sweeping gesture that started at his head and moved down towards his feet, Sion replied, “A big guy like me belongs in the big city!” And the grin on his face grew wider.

Hisako nodded in approval. “In the past the people of the Mist Village and Wood Sprites of the Hearth Tree have been friends, even allies. I hope that we can be again.”

Richter replied, “I hope so too. I was concerned that you might not welcome me as a friend anymore. My village is on a ley line of Dark Magic.”

“It is true that many evil creatures are drawn to Dark or Death magic, but that does not make those powers inherently evil. Night is just as natural as day, and death will be always be a part of life. Your actions will determine the character of your village, and you have earned my trust,” Hisako said. “Now is there anything else we can do to aid your journey?”

Humbled by her faith in him, he smiled, “I could use a way to transport goods to and from the city.”

“We can help with this, though it will take the rest of the day. Is there anything else,” she asked again.

Sion stepped forward, “We have found an artifact of evil, Mother. I hoped that you knew how to destroy it.” Richter unwrapped the staff, showing it to Hisako.

For the first time, Richter saw a look true anger on her face. “Drop that thing,” she commanded.

Richter quickly complied, releasing it to tumble out of its wrappings. It fell, but did not strike the ground. The golden grasses wrapped around the staff. The grass wound so tight that Richter could hear squeaking from the pressure. Some of the gold color leached from the grasses as they tried to crush the black wood. Brighter flashes of red color could be seen coming from the staff, almost as if it tried to free itself from the golden vice. A look of serious concentration was on Hisako’s face. With a tightening of her jaw, she glared at the staff, and then there was a loud rumbling sound. A small tear opened in the ground, widening to five feet long and one foot wide. The grass bent, lowering the staff into the ground as the red pulses came faster and faster. The rent in the earth, closed over the staff and all was quiet for a moment before a boom came from beneath them, more felt than heard. Richter looked over

the seemingly benign sea of golden grass that he now knew was a deadly prehensile defense. Hisako exhaled a breath of relief.

You have completed the Quest: Destroy Evil's Weapon. A Royal Pixie Chrysalis was recovered! This may have long reaching consequences in the future!

Reward: 1000 XP

"It is done," she said. "That was an artifact of greater evil than you know. I can see why you instinctually felt it needed to be destroyed my son. It was not just a tool of evil. It was a corruption of good! At the core of the staff was a Royal Pixie chrysalis!"

Sion inhaled in shock. "Can it be true? Can you save it?"

"I don't understand. What's happening," asked Richter.

"Sion may have told you that goblins were our racial enemies. As such, neither of our two races can normally abide the other, and aggressive qualities are increased on both sides. That is partly because goblins are usually of a negative alignment, and wood sprites are normally of positive alignment. Pixies are the opposite side of that trait. They are our natural allies and bring a completion to our magic. It is said that every sprite born has half of a destiny, and each pixie born has the other half. Long ago, even before I was born,

there was a sickness that only affected pixies. Despite all of the efforts of the races of Good, pixies were erased from the surface of The Land. Finding this chrysalis is like finding the other half our soul! Will you please relinquish the pixie into our care? We can channel our life magic into it and hopefully revive at least one of the species." She looked at him with a pleading gaze.

"Uhhh, yeah," Richter said, taken aback by the depth of emotion in Hisako's voice. He then immediately felt like a moron for not giving a better answer than 'uhhh, yeah' in such a pivotal moment.

Your relationship has improved with Wood Sprites from friendly to trusted.

The relationship of the Mist Village has improved with Wood Sprites from friendly to trusted.

Hisako's face shone like the sun. Her anger at seeing the staff had been replaced by pure joy. "Thank you for this precious gift. Rest with us, then start on you journey in the morning." Their rations had run out the night before, and so Richter welcomed a good meal. The Hearth Mother turned and walked through the golden grass. As Richter, Sion and other sprites followed her, he thought hopeful thoughts for the morrow.

CHAPTER 13



The sky began to lighten with colors of peach and amber. Sion and Richter once again stood at the boundaries of the meadow containing the Hearth Tree. “Once you return to your village, make your way due west. After several weeks of travel you should reach the boundary of the forest. There, you will find a road. The other travelers you meet can direct you to the city of Law. Be careful! There are many dangers of in the forest. We are on the Northern side and there shouldn’t be any organized tribes between here and Yves, but sometimes the southern tribes send hunting parties up. They are not as kind as we are.” Turning to Sion, Hisako placed a cupped hand to his face. “Come back to us safely my son.”

Closing his eyes, he bowed his head, “Yes mother.”

Led by two sprites, a pair of ponies with saddle bags were brought to them. Checking the bags, they were full of food stuffs and other useful tools including more Sprite Arrows of Nature. It was a welcome sight because they had only been able to recover a few after the fight with the goblins. Thanking Hisako a final time, they mounted the ponies and moved off into the forest. Riding in silence for the first ten minutes, Richter then looked to Sion asking, “So you’re a prince, huh?”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Sion replied curtly without turning his head.

Chuckling under his breath, Richter replied, “Whatever you say your highness,” and rode on next to his friend.

It took three days to get back to village. Each night they scouted for herbs, and Sion began to teach him the rudiments of potion making. The tools that Sion used were too small to be of practical use for Richter, but he did still obtain the skill by assisting Sion. Unfortunately, knowledge was not enough to increase his skill level though, as he did not advance further than level one with 0% towards the next level.

The peace of the ride also let him focus upon an area he had been ignoring, his point allocation. He did not want everything randomly allocated and it had been almost a week since he had reached level 4. Based upon the battles he had fought so far, he would not last long in a stand up fight. Each kill he had made had been greatly aided by either surprise or poison already weakening his enemies. The large damage that just the edge of the bear's strike had caused worried him. It was clear he needed more health. At the same time though, the power of both his Imbue Arrow and Focus skills meant his stamina and mana also needed to be higher. It served his playing style better to be well rounded anyway. He examined each characteristic carefully.

Strength – Improves damage with melee weapons or thrown weapons. Each point increases carrying capacity by 10 kg. Affects anything that requires brawn, ie climbing, wrestling, intimidation. Other unknown effects to be discovered.

Agility – Improves accuracy with ranged or thrown weapons. Determines movement speed. Determines dodge. Determines balance. Affects ability to move without being detected. Other unknown effects to be discovered.

Dexterity – Determines attack speed. Improves damage with ranged weapons. Improves reflexes. Improves accuracy of melee weapons. Other unknown effects to be discovered.

Constitution – Determines Health. Each point increases Health by 10 points. Affects resistance to poison, illness, extreme temp, etc. Affects stamina regeneration. Other unknown effects to be discovered.

Endurance – Determines stamina. Each point increases Stamina by 10 points. Affects ability to perform physical exertions at peak efficiency. Other unknown effects to be discovered.

Intelligence – Determines mana. Each point increases Mana by 10 points. Affects resistance to mental attacks. Affects effectiveness of certain skills. Reasoning improved. Other unknown effects to be discovered.

Wisdom – Determines mana regeneration. Affects magical resistance. Determines perception. Other unknown effects to be discovered.

Charisma – Determines the likelihood others will like you or want to interact with you. A higher score may open certain quests that would otherwise be locked. Other unknown effects to be discovered.

Luck – It will affect you in a million different ways… or not. But as the man said, “I’d rather be lucky than dead.”

Each description was helpful save the last. Of course every game he had ever played had a crappy description for luck.

He had twenty four points to invest. He could definitely see the bonus from being a Chaos seed coming in handy. He would theoretically be 50% more powerful than other humans at an analogous level. He decided to invest half of his points equally into Constitution, Endurance and Intelligence, raising Health, Mana and Stamina by forty points each.

As his character seemed based on range attacks and speed, at least for now, he decided to forgo strength. Agility had already been increased. Though it pained him to put points in a “soft” area like Charisma, it was clear he could not look at his current situation as if he was playing a simple RPG. This was his life now. His upcoming interaction with a whole city meant that interpersonal interactions were going to be important. Also the advice of the hearth mother to make a community was something he took seriously. The comedy of having a four foot tall older woman dictating his life wasn’t anything new, his own mother was five feet of feisty fury.

Hating every moment of the decision, he invested six points in Charisma. Choosing yes on the final ‘are you sure’ prompt, he felt like he had just sacrificed six children! He also invested four points in luck, because… hey, what self-respecting southerner couldn’t win a hand of Texas Holdem. At that thought, he made a mental note to invent Texas Holdem. He was sure he could make a fortune cleaning out the medieval rubes that seemed to live around here. He put his final two points in dexterity to get a bit more attack damage out his archery.

In addition to the points from his leveling, his exertions during his quest to cleanse the forest had given him +2 Endurance, +1 Strength, +3 Dexterity. Looking at his character, he decided that despite his low level he liked how he was rounding out.

Name: Richter
Age: 24
Level: 6, 15%
Health: 140 Mana: 140 Stamina: 160
Strength: 11
Agility: 17
Dexterity: 26
Constitution: 14
Endurance: 16
Intelligence: 14
Wisdom: 10
Charisma: 16
Luck: 14
Abilities:
Limitless
Gift of Tongues
Skills:
Herb Lore Lvl 2; 81% to next level, 100% affinity
Potions Lvl 1; 0% to next level, 100% affinity

Analyze Lvl 1; 5% to next level, 100% affinity
Stealth Lvl 3; 44% to next level, 100% affinity
Archery Lvl 4; 23% to next level, 100% affinity
Imbue Arrow Lvl 1; 43% to next level, 100% affinity
Focus Lvl 1; 0% to next level, 100% affinity
Swordsmanship Lvl 1; 28% to next level, 100% affinity
Small Blades Lvl 1; 0% to next level, 100% affinity
Light Armor Lvl 2; 21% to next level, 100% affinity
Marks:
Master of Mist Village
Resistances:
Mental 15%
Spiritual 15%
Race: Human (Chaos Seed)
Reputation: Lvl 1 “Who are you again?”
Alignment: Neutral
Language: All

The last thing he had to decide was where to put the proficiencies. He had a total of 100% to increase any skill, in groupings of 25%. His strongest asset was now Imbue Arrow making it an easy decision. He placed all 100% into the skill and was shown the prompt.

Congratulations! You have reached skill level 2 in Imbue Arrow. +5% damage. +5% speed of mana flow.

One curious thing was that both his Focus and Imbue Arrow skills was offset on his status page. He had seen the same thing, when examining Sion’s status. Now that he was thinking about it, Richter remembered that both had been called ‘subskills.’ Asking the sprite about it, the explanation was fairly simple. Subskills were

dependent on another main skill. As such increasing the subskill would increase the main skill slightly, but the subskill could never be of a higher level than the main skill. Richter nodded understanding, and they rode on.

Midday on the third day after leaving the Hearth Tree, they arrived back at the Mist Village. The trip was much faster now that they knew exactly where they were going. As they came upon the ruins he was now the Master of, Richter chuckled silently thinking, could my life BE any more manga? He was pleasantly surprised however, upon his first sight of the village. A trench lined the outside of the ruined wall, six feet wide and six feet deep. The dirt from the trench had been lined up and packed on top of the stone remnants creating a four foot earthen wall. Hard packed dirt led across trench in one area, leading to a break in the crumpled wall. Outside of the trench there were stacks of chopped down trees with the branches cut off and piled to the side. Three piles of stone were also present, delineated by size, presumably the loose rocks from inside the wall. All of the bodies had of course been removed, but even the stone had been scrubbed clean of some of the black blood stains. Only a trace of the previous foul odor remained. What was before him now was a plateau of grass pockmarked with freshly turned earth where

the trees had been cut down and then the stumps removed. True to his instruction, Futen appeared several feet away, and glided to a stop in front of him.

“Welcome back, my Lord.”

Richter smiled, “You’ve done well Futen. How is our village?”

“We have had some exciting developments in the last week, my Lord,” the remnant said. The content of his message contrasted sharply with his emotionless tone. “Though we cannot erect external buildings as I stated, we have collected raw resources as you can see. I have also explored the floor where you claimed Mastery of the village. I have found several useful rooms. If you will come with me sir.”

Futen began gliding away at the speed of a normal walk. Climbing the hill to the cave entrance, Richter and Sion followed it inside. Grey lights cast a gentle glow over the tunnel. Periodically placed along the top of the hallway, globes of slowing mist could be seen.

“Where did these come from,” Richter asked.

“They are one of the improvements open to you my lord. The mana requirement for the mist lights is negligible. Once cast, and

they last for a year at a time, so I took the liberty."

The tunnel opened into the chamber of their grand fight. The ceiling arched above their heads, this time illuminated by mist globes clearly showing vaulted ceilings. The blood had been cleaned from the floors along with much of the grime. A massive mosaic could now be seen in the floor. Four separate spirals that met in the middle. Each spiral was a different color. One spiral was gold and the opposing spiral black. The other two were blue or clear respectively. The center of the mosaic was a dark gray diamond. Opposite from where they entered the room, a staircase could be seen leading downward. The other entrances were also well lit.

"On this floor is a meeting hall, larder, storage room, armory, barracks and treasury, and several other empty rooms. The stairway leads to the first floor of the catacombs."

Richter had been walking around the mosaic examining it. He nodded along as Futen spoke, but looked up sharply at the last. Treasury did you say? Realizing he had not asked aloud, most likely because his mouth had started watering, he tried again.

"Treasury did you say?"

"Yes my lord, I was going to show you that…"

“Let’s go now,” Richter said cutting the remnant off.

The remnant changed direction, gliding to a hallway on the left. At the end the hallway was a solid door. It appeared to be made of a bluish silver metal, with a clear circle of glass set at head height.

“What is it made of?”

“This is elementum. Not quite as hard as mithril, but extremely durable nonetheless. It also has properties to resist almost all forms of magic to a large degree.”

“Well open it Futen.”

“I cannot my Lord.”

“You said you had exciting news.”

“Yes, my Lord. The news is that I had found the treasury.”

Richter glared at the floating grey orb. The orb just floated impervious to his stare.

“It would be a lot more exciting if you could open the door!”

“That is why I was going to leave this door until the tour,” Futen said.

Fighting the urge to create a neck for the orb so he could strangle it, Richter said, “Are you telling me that I have a treasury but

I can’t get into it?!”

“No, my Lord.”

Richter glared at the orb again, waiting for it to say more. He stared at it until he realized the futility of having a staring contest with an eyeless orb. Meanwhile Sion had fallen to the floor rolling on his back laughing. Transferring his stare to the sprite, it seemed to have about as much effect as it had on the orb.

“Then how do I get in!” His voice was nearly a shout.

“Oh, simply hold your Mark in front of the clear circle on the door, my Lord.”

“Why didn’t you tell me at first?”

“I was going to cover it during the tour, my Lord.”

One eye starting to twitch, Richter said, “If I ever find out that you’re messing with me, I will find a way to turn you pink!”

“Of course, my Lord,” the remnant replied in his *almost* deadpan voice.

Walking up to the door, Richter raised his left arm and held his Mark up to the glass circle. A soft voice spoke inside of his mind, “Do you wish the door to open Master?”

“Yes.”

“As you wish.”

A sound came from behind the door like the withdrawing of bolts. It then swung open, and Richter was greeted by the sight of an octagonal room with shelves lining the walls. Empty shelves. Sighing heavily, he swallowed the greedy lump in his throat, and moved into the room. As he stepped in, he realized that shelves were not completely empty. Three small items were on shelves against the right side of the room, near the door. He hadn’t been able to see them until he was inside the room. Moving to the first item he opened it, and a mix of copper, silver and gold coins were greeted his gaze. Even though the chest was only the size of a loaf of bread, hundreds of coins inside. There had to be dozens of gold coins present which were worth a hundred dollars each by themselves! Doing a little internal jig, he moved to the second chest. It held a scattering of gems which might be worth more than even the coins. Yup! His mouth was *definitely* watering now. Almost unable to tear his eyes from the second chest he moved on. The third item was a book. Picking it up, he attempted to read it, but the words swam in his vision. Examining the prompt associated with it,

You have found: Magic book

Groaning in frustration, Richter said, “Futen, identify this.”

The orb flared, and Richter looked again.

You have found: Book of Charm. You can convince an enemy that they are your friend. In battle they will fight for you. Casting this upon a creature lowers they regard for you after the spell wears off. Requirements: Intelligence 16, Charisma 18

Definitely a useful spell! Plenty of melee battles in games that Richter had played had been won by taking control of enemy units and making them fight each other. Turn your enemy’s strengths against them! He was pretty sure he had heard that in a Tarantino movie. It was a shame that he hadn’t met the requirement level yet. It was certainly a priority though! It also showed that Charisma was more versatile than he initially thought.

Despite the somewhat threadbare status of the treasury, this was certainly a start! Putting the book in his pack, he then picked up both chests carrying them under his arms. Leaving the treasury, he walked back to the center of the chamber. As he walked away from the octagonal room, he heard the door closing again and the locks snapping back into place. Laying both chests down in the central chamber, Richter asked Futen, “What else should I know?”

“The armory is this way, my Lord.”

Following the orb, Richter and Sion made their way into another hallway. Again he was greeted by a door, though this door was only wood banded with iron. It also possessed a clear circle at head height. Raising his wrist he thought, Open. No voice chimed inside of his head this time, his intent was apparently clear. Moving into the room, lines of swords, axes and bows sat under massive amounts of cobwebs. Definitely the armory that time had forgotten. He closed the door and walked back.

“I am sure there are many things to explore, but is there anything crucial that I need to know?”

“I have followed your instructions my Lord, and have had the workers gathering raw materials and working on basic physical defenses. I would advise caution however, that you have not instituted any of the magical defenses.”

Richter looked blankly at the orb wanting clarification, until realizing that yet again, an eyeless orb might not be so good at picking up facial expressions.

“What defenses,” he asked.

“You have access to the village interface, my Lord. You simply need to focus upon the options which are available.”

Richter selected the icon for his village. A sprawling list of pull down menus filled Richter’s vision. Realizing how long this might take, he closed the menu in a fit of annoyance. “Can I get a chair?”

A short time later, both he and Sion were settled into the barracks. Really just a line of stone bed in a long room. There were no creature comforts, but it would serve. The ponies were tacked outside where they could graze. Sion settled down for the night, while Richter laid back and browsed through the interface. He first looked into defenses. It simply showed the status of current defenses. Next he checked Enchantments. This showed a host of options. Most were greyed out, but two at the top were available: Concealing Mist and Confusing Mist.

Concealing Mist: Cost 400 mana. Upkeep 200 mana per day. Generates a thick mist field at the borders of the village which extends to the boundaries of your domain. You may grant immunity to this effect to those of your choosing. Attacking or taking hostile action against a creature will negate the effects for a short period.

Confusing Mist: Cost 800 mana. Upkeep 400 mana per day. Generates a thick mist field at the borders of the village which

extends to the boundaries of your domain. Causes disorientation that will lead affected creatures in random directions. You may grant immunity to this effect to beings of your choosing. Attacking or taking hostile action against a creature will negate the effects for a short period.

The enchantments were passive, but he could easily see the power of them.

“What does it mean by the boundaries of the domain, Futen,” Richter asked.

“You are Master of more than just the village my Lord. Your power also extends ten miles in all directions. The boundaries will extend as you increase the village level.”

“You have mentioned increasing the village level several times. Just how do we it?”

“There are multiple requirements my Lord. You can see them on your interface.”

Letting his eyes unfocus again he began searching. Ultimately, he found the tab, Settlement Level.

Level 1: Total Mana: 1000. Mana regenerates at (Total mana/24) per hour. Boundary of surrounding lands 10 miles from Great Seal.

Requirements for level up: Increase population to at least 100. Build ten free standing buildings. Master three levels of the catacombs. Finish four quests of the Mist Village.

"Where do I get quests from?"

"I am tied to this Place of Power, my Lord," Futen said. "As such I can read the needs of this land. There is one quest that is available now. As time goes on I will tell you of other needs of the village. You may also find information on quests in your Master's interface."

You have been offered a Quest: Unlock your Power I. Your village will increase your power, but you must care for it in turn. Currently there is a local dungeon that needs to be cleared out. Reward: Unlock one of the Powers. Yes or No?

As if there was a question! If Richter was right, this quest would increase his magic immensely! Choosing yes, he looked at Futen. "Any idea how I can find it?"

"I can move freely within the boundaries of the village. I will guide you."

"How about it," he asked Sion. "Ready to kick some monster butt?"

"That's what I do," his friend answered with a grin.

“In the morning then,” Richter responded with a grin of his own.

CHAPTER 14



Awakening early, Richter told Futen not to summon the workers today. This was somewhat of a sacrifice though a short lived one. Futen had continued his report until Richter had fallen asleep. One of the items was that an iron mine had been found. Richter agreed with Futen's assessment that defenses should be put in place to protect the village, however. Summoning the workers could wait until an enchantment was cast. They walked outside and stood near the earthwork wall. Richter opened his interface. Prior to casting the spell however, a thought occurred to him.

“The purpose of the Concealing Mist and Confusing Mist spells are to hide the village. If there is a well-defined border of magical mist though, won’t people be able to figure out the location of the village by just mapping the boundaries?”

“The mist slowly builds along the boundaries of our territory, my Lord. Have you ever been able to mark exactly when and where mist starts? I assure you the enchantment is quite effective, but it is not fool proof. Also to map the boundaries of the mist would mean walking for about one hundred miles. The enchantment is not fool proof. It is a possibility that a master mage, or someone with a strong item, could dispel the enchantment, at least temporarily. Or a being with high magical resistance might be able to ignore its effects. So while I advise that you not put all of your faith in the enchantment, my Lord, I assure you that it is very useful,” Futen replied.

Nodding assent, Richter activated his the interface bringing up the enchantments available. He had thought about it last night, and decided the longer his village remained secret the better. Even though using 400 mana was a steep upkeep it was worth it. It was also worth noting that that the village mana regenerated. At a rate of the total mana divided by the hours in the day (1000/24) the 400 would be replenished after ten hours. Also, he didn’t really have

another use for the mana right now. He selected Confusing Mist and activated it.

Richter felt a pressure build within his body, feeling like he was being filled with cool wet wind. It reminded him of standing on the boardwalk watching a storm roll in from the ocean. The feeling built until it seemed to press against the thin boundaries of his skin. All of a sudden a roiling sea of grey mist exploded from his body in all directions. It flowed and flowed, building in speed, obscuring all sight. As suddenly as it started, the flow from his body stopped. The mist continued to rollback until it reached the edges of the village. There it hung like a grey curtain, making any visualization beyond five to ten feet from the edge near impossible.

What happened to my immunity to the mist, Richter thought. What good is this spell if I blind myself too? Just as he was thinking that the spell might be more trouble than it was worth, his vision suddenly sharpened and he could see just as well as before the spell was cast. Strangely he could also see the mist, though it in no way inhibited his vision. Now satisfied with the results of the spell, he nodded happily to himself and told Futen to the lead the way to the dungeon.

As the three of them moved west out of the village they crossed into the mist, pulling the ponies behind them, though they emptied the saddlebags first. After ten feet they were completely surrounded by a walls of grey. The mist posed no problem for Richter, or Futen apparently. It was only a few minutes more, however, when he heard Sion call out to him. “Richter, where are you?”

Looking back Richter saw him clearly only six or seven feet away. Taking a step closer, he saw Sion’s eyes orient on him sharply. “It is like you just appeared out of thin air,” the sprite said.

“That is so strange, I could see you clearly. Let’s test this for a moment. Try to follow me.”

Stepping away, he moved forward, but in less than a minute Sion called out for him to stop again. Looking back, the sprite once again seemed to be scanning his surroundings. Richter walked towards him and became visible once he was within a few feet. “What happened?”

“I was following you. First you became indistinct and then I could not see you at all. I would have sworn that to find you I would have gone well to the right of the direction that you just came back from. Did you move to the side after I lost you?”

“No,” Richter replied. “I came straight back. This new enchantment is more powerful than I thought! Wait a moment.” Opening the village interface, he worked through the options until reaching Confusing Mist. Focusing upon the tab he found the section for Immunity. Thinking of Sion, his name appeared under the drop down list. Glancing at his Companion, Richter saw the sprite’s eyes widen.

“With this magic, none will be able to stand against us. We will see them from a distance while they will constantly be confused and separated,” Sion exclaimed. Richter nodded happily.

They both followed Futen deeper into the forest.

They walked along the base of the mountain that the village was nestled against for half a day. Their pace was slow in light of the thick undergrowth of the untouched forest. The rocky prominence lowered in elevation until it turned into a series of wooded hills. They noticed a fair amount of wild life as they made their way forward, but despite the mist concealing them from sight, many bounded away as soon as they came in sight.

“Futen, why does it seem like the animals can see us,” Richter asked.

“Spells like Confusing Mist target a specific level of consciousness. Much like your Charm spell, the Concealing Mist will work on humaniods, but not lesser thought forms such as in animals or vastly different thought patterns as with certain monsters. Higher beings would also probably be immune.”

Definitely good to know, Richter thought. He wasn’t as safe as he had thought he was. “How much further?”

They were just cresting a small hill. At the trough between the hill they were on and the next, were two large slabs of stone leaning against one another. The dark entrance of a cave could be seen between them leading into the interior of the hill. Of greater importance were the two skeletons aiming arrows in his direction though.

Immediately dropping to the ground, both arrows flew well over his head and neither seemed particularly well aimed. Raising his head he saw each skeleton had knocked another arrow and was scanning the hill he and Sion were lying upon. Thankfully, the mist seemed to be concealing their position. It was only his talking that had given away their general position. They backed down from the top of the hill until the cave entrance was once again hidden from

sight. They pulled the ponies back further tying the lead ropes to a tree a hundred yards further into the forest.

“Futen,” Richter said in a furious whisper.

“Yes, my Lord,” the orb said in its normal voice.

“Softer,” he hissed. “Speak softer when we are around enemies!”

“Yes, my Lord,” it responded in a more subdued tone.

“In the future,” Richter said in clipped tones, “let us know well in advance that enemies are close by. Specifically before we are shot by them!”

“Yes, my Lord.”

“Wait here a moment Sion. Futen turn invisible and come with me.” Richter walked back to the hill, and then circled to the left of his previous approach, making his way back to the top as silently as he could. Neither skeleton had moved far from its position in front of the cave. Looking down at the one on the right, he used his Analyze skill.

Skeleton: Lvl 6. Health 160. Mana 0. Stamina 120.

Moving his gaze to the one on left,

Skeleton: Lvl 5. Health 140. Mana 0. Stamina 110.

A bit disappointed about the lack of information, he shrugged. Analyze was only level one, and he assumed that as it leveled up, he would gain more information.

He backed the hill to Sion. “There are only two,” he whispered. The mist will hide us unless we get too close. Let’s make our way up, and use Imbued arrows to destroy them. You take the one on the left, I’ll take the one on the right.”

They crawled up to the top of the hill, and knocked arrows. Building power around his arrow it began to glow golden while Sion’s glowed blue. As the glow intensified however, the skeletons oriented on them and began to prepare arrows of them own. Knowing they were out of time he released his arrow, Sion’s streaking away right after. Richter’s arrow struck the skeleton’s shoulder. It spun away to collapse against the hill.

Sion’s arrow struck his skeleton center mass causing it to be knocked down. The skeleton Richter had struck was back on its feet in an instant, minus its right arm. The first shot had knocked the entire appendage free. It had drawn a sword from a scabbard at its waist, and was running towards him. He took quick aim and shot again. In his hurry, he lacked the focus to properly imbue the arrow. The normal arrow only caused the skeleton to miss a step before it

started charging up the hill again. A second imbued arrow from Sion struck it in the hip causing it to flop back onto its chest. It struggled to rise, its remaining arm bracing against the hill.

An arrow struck Richter in his chest. The simple arrowhead was not powerful enough to penetrate his Chest Plate of the Wood Sprite, thankfully, but it did knock him off balance and removed fourteen health. As he recovered he looked at the skeleton shooting at him, and saw it in already had drawn another arrow and was attempting to line up another shot. He dove to the side, an arrow whistling by only a foot to the right. He was immensely glad that his increased Agility granted him better dodge! Having no time to orient himself for a counter attack, Richter picked his head up to look at the skeleton and hopefully dodge the next attack. What he saw was the wonderful sight of Sion's imbued arrow striking a critical blow to the skeleton's head. The skull was not only removed, but it shattered the facial bones as well. The bones of the body collapsed into a pile.

The second skeleton was back on its feet, and was unsteadily moving towards them with its sword in hand. Drawing his short sword, Richter feinted causing it to slash at him, but he had already bent down to strike it in the knee. The skeleton's blow missed entirely, but Richter's did not. It's already weakened magical bonds

could not withstand Richter's strike and its lower leg flew off causing it to fall on its face again. One more strike to the back of its neck caused its head to fly off and ended the fight.

Both he and Sion stood with arrows drawn and pointed at the cave, waiting to see if the noise of the fight brought more enemies out, but none came. Richter eased the draw on his bow and examined the opening.

You have found: Seasoned Cave

"Futen," Richer said.

"Yes my Lord," a disembodied voice answered from somewhere in front of him.

"Stay invisible. Scout ahead into the cave, let us know what you find."

"As you wish."

The two of them waited for a few minutes. As they did they gathered the weapons of the skeletons they had destroyed as well as whatever arrows could be salvaged. The skeletons' gear was all common and poor quality, but there might be a use for it later. Not needing to sit long, the remnant appeared back in front of them. "There are two caverns inside the cave, one after another. There are

three skeletons with blades in the first cavern. A short tunnel connects the two. In the second chamber, there are five more skeletons. There is a stairway leading down at the back of the chamber, but that is as far as I could go."

"Why couldn't you go further? Was there a barrier you couldn't pass?"

"I am bound to the village. It is only because you have absorbed the Heart Crystal that I can go so far afield. Normally I cannot move more than half a mile from the village borders. Now that we are past that point, I cannot be more than one hundred yards from you."

Knowing that there were eight enemies within one hundred yards, it seemed clear that there would be close quarter fighting. "Futen, can you make your light brighter? Bright enough to see by in a dark cave?"

"Yes, Master, but away from the village, I will not be able to maintain a bright light for more than several minutes without rest."

"Does the mist go into the cave? Can we rely on its concealment," Sion asked.

"No, the mist stops at the cave mouth."

“Okay then,” Richter replied. “Become invisible, and go to the top of the first cavern. Wait five seconds then flare brightly.” Looking at Sion he asked, “Have your mana and stamina recovered,” at his Companion’s nod, Richter explained the plan, “We strike immediately after Futen flares the light. Hopefully it will distract them. Take the one in the middle, I will hit the one on the right. Keep firing as quickly as you can to keep distance between us and them. Now go Futen!”

Placing an arrow to the string, he focused on his aura. It surrounded the arrow almost instantly, and he began to pour his mana into it. He held allowed the mana to flow for three seconds, reasoning that the deeper hey got into the dungeon, the stronger the opponents would be. He began to see streaks of black flow over the gold aura and moved into the cave mouth, Sion to his right. Just before entering a white grey light flared. They stepped inside, and both immediately took aim. As hoped, the blast of light had taken the attention of the skeletons for key seconds.

Triggering his Focus skill, the skeleton he was targeting seemed to jump towards him. Easily focusing on its chest he released. The golden streak with a black tinge hit the skeleton’s chest knocking it back to the cave wall. The charged arrow made a deafening boom in the confined space causing a ringing in his ears. Sion’s arrow

blasted into the skeleton in the middle, which was holding a greatsword, making an even greater explosive clap.

The undamaged skeleton immediately started running at them with a sword in one hand and a buckler in the other. It moved with the same uncanny speed of the skeletons outside. It just seemed wrong that something dead could move so quickly. Despite that, Sion's Dexterity gave him excellent combat speed. He was able to strike the skeleton two more times before it could cross the sixty yards to the cave entrance. The first hit its buckler and was deflected up above the bony head, but it served a purpose by knocking the buckler out of the way. Sion's second shot exploded into the skeleton's pelvis separating its top and bottom half.

Richter had imbued another arrow with magical force and attacked his initial opponent again, but missed as the skeleton dodged to the side. The failed shot was not a small thing. He had already lost more than half of his mana! He quickly drew his short sword and braced to meet the bony bastard!

Its cutlass swung in a viscious arc intending to decapitate him. He blocked the blow with his short sword, but it then swung a bony fist at his face which connected. He reeled back from the hit, pain exploding in his jaw and his health decreasing by a further 8%. Stars

occupied his vision, and not knowing where the next strike would come from, Richter let his legs fold and he rolled onto his back then pushing up with his arms to land on all fours.

The skeleton was closing again, but was struck by Sion's blue arrow, knocking it back. The sprite immediately struck the skeleton with another imbued arrow. The speed of his attacks were impressive, but despite high dexterity, Sion still needed time to put any real power into his Imbue Arrow skill.

Richter threw himself back into the battle, a backhand swing striking the neck of the skeleton which had struck him. The combination of blows was enough to make it collapse into component parts. He heard, "Duck," and dropped to the floor. The middle skeleton had rejoined the fight and swung horizontally with its iron greatsword. The attack missed, but it used the momentum of its swing to bring the blade above its head intending to strike down and cleave him in two. Again his Agility saved him as he rolled to the side. The force of the missed strike made vibrations in the cave floor that he could feel.

The skeleton was overbalanced by its failed attack. Richter swung his sword at the back of its left knee. On his back, he couldn't put too much strength into the blow, but it was enough to make his

enemy fall forward. Sion's arrow, a brilliant blue of imbued magic, hit its clavicle, tearing away both shoulder and head. As with the previous skeletons, removal of the skull broke whatever magic was animating it. The bones fell apart. A motion attracted Richter's attention. The first of the skeletons from the second chamber came running into the battle. Sounds from the tunnel clearly indicated others were close behind.

"Run," Richter shouted! He jumped back onto his feet, and followed his own advice. The half skeleton Sion had hit early in the fight raised itself up on one arm, its sword cocked to swipe at him. Sion shot it in the back before turning to run. It collapsed like its three friends, and Richter ran past. Once out of the cave, Richter pulled Sion with him to the right moving twenty feet into the mist before turning and drawing arrows. Neither began to Imbue their arrows however. While Richter was sure they both remembered that the light from their arrows could draw the skeleton's attention, he was equally sure that Sion must have used the greater part of his mana.

"Move back," Richter breathed silently. He began to take his first step as the skeletons spilled out of the cave. Two had bows, one a bastard sword and a fourth a heavy dagger and round shield. The

fifth was slightly larger and held an axe. Knowing Sion need more time to recover his mana, they continued moving back slowly and quietly. A large fallen tree was behind them. Huddling behind it, Richter looked over and focused upon the largest skeleton invoking Analyze.

Skeleton Warrior: Lvl 9. Health 310/310. Mana 0/0. Stamina 220/220.

“FML,” he muttered under his breath.

“What does that mean,” Sion quietly asked as they moved back and took shelter behind a fallen tree.

“I’ll tell you later. Futen, where are you?”

The grey sphere appeared in front of them with its inner light muted.

“Can those things hurt you? Can you be hurt?”

“I can be destroyed by strong magic, but I am nearly immune to physical attacks my Lord.”

“Good! This is the plan. Those three skeletons almost kicked our ass. We need the concealment of the mist to destroy these things. So we are going to wait a moment for our mana to regenerate then I want you to turn invisible and make a loud noise to draw their

attention. We will power our arrows and attack. While that skeleton warrior is almost definitely the biggest damage dealer, those archers are the biggest threat to us out here in the open. So we fire, and fire at them again, until they are down. Then we fade back and split up. Once enough time passes, they won't be able to find us in the mist unless we power up. So we hit and move, hit and move. Meanwhile, Futen you move around and make noise and flare lights to confuse them. Can you speak in a different voice than the one you always use?"

"Than the one you always use," Richter's own voice spoke back to him from the remnant.

Pausing for a moment, "Okay, new rule. Never do that again unless I ask… it's super creepy."

"Yes, my Lord," Futen replied in its normal monotone.

At his current mana regen rate, he got one point back every ten seconds. He was at about 50% of his mana, so that would take a little over ten minutes.

After the prerequisite time he looked at Sion, "Are you ready?" His friend nodded and said, "Let's move."

They left the shelter of the tree still seeing the five skeleton’s outside of the cave entrance in a rough half circle. They stood nearly motionless, heads turning slowly, searching for some indication of the duo’s location. Futen phased out of view, and Richter and Sion knocked arrows waiting. A white flash and voice from the other side of the skeleton’s position was their cue. All of the skeletons turned towards the improvised flash bang. A blue and golden glow immediately flared into existence behind them. Both Richter and Sion waited three seconds, the glow growing brighter and more intense, and then they released. The skeletal warrior seemed cognizant of the danger behind it before the other monsters. It squatted, bringing its double headed axe in front of its skull like a shield. It was not, of course, their intended target. A gold and blue blur converged on the chest of one archer shattering it instantly. The concussive force of two close proximity strikes staggered the other skeletons.

Sion launched one strike and then a second at the remaining archer, taking only the minimal time to power the arrows. His goal was to keep it off balance. Though neither shot landed with crushing force, the skeleton was staggered. It allowed Sion to once again imbue an arrow with extra force, and land a blow to its left chest. It

was not destroyed outright, but one arm was knocked free. While it wasn’t dead, it would certainly no longer be a threat as an archer.

The three melee skeletons had already started running towards them. As discussed, Sion took off to the right while Richter moved to the left. Each ran following the slight curve of their respective hills until the skeletons lost sight of them. It took about a minute, but by making short changes in direction periodically it became clear when the skeletons lost the trail. They were once again safe in the protection of the mist. Without speaking the skeletons all seemed to arrive at the conclusion that they should return to guard the cave mouth. They stopped searching and returned to guard the entrance. All was silent.

Sion and Richter looked at the unaware monsters, breathing as quietly as possible. They had regrouped and positioned themselves at the top of a hill looking down on the bony creatures. Another white flare was their cue to resume attack. It flared right in the midst of the skeletons causing a small amount of pandemonium. A blue arrow struck the skeleton with the shield in the back dealing extra damage. A golden arrow struck the warrior in the shoulder, but it seemed to simply shrug the blow off. Both lesser skeletons moved after Sion who fired with his usual alacrity, one arrow per second. The barrage

staggered each skeleton in turn. He was moving back as he shot. Each skeleton was struck twice struggling up the hill before Sion ran off a short distance, and then started the onslaught again.

The skeletal warrior rushed Richter, axe pulled back ready to swing. He moved to the left drawing and beginning to imbue his arrow, but as soon as the glow began the skeleton warrior moved towards him with intimidating speed. Judging by the information he had seen with Analyze, Richter knew he was no match for his opponent in a standup fight. Three more times he moved off and attempted to attack the warrior, but each time he could not do more than summon his aura before the warrior was almost upon him. He feared moving further away lest he lose the warriors interest. It might pursue Sion whose own battle was not concluded based upon the blue flares that could be seen over the hill. Looking around an idea occurred to Richter though.

“Futen, draw it up the hill. Make a gold flare and use my voice.”

A moment later, Richter’s own voice could be heard up the hill, and the skeletal warrior followed it axe swinging. Meanwhile Richter moved down the hill and began Imbuing his arrow. After one second his arrow glowed golden. After two seconds, the warrior noticed him, and turned to run down the hill. After three seconds, black streaks

once again shot over the golden aura surrounding the arrow. The warrior ran closer, now only 20 yards away. It was building tremendous speed as it sprinted downhill. After four seconds, the black streaks flowed up and down the arrow and a high pitched whine grew in Richter's ears. The warrior began its swing obviously aiming for decapitation, only to trip over the fallen tree that it didn't see until too late. It fell over it, prone, only 12 feet away from Richter. Five seconds had passed and black streaks moved over the arrow to fast to see. Richter released and struck the warrior at point blank range directly in the head.

The Imbued arrow didn't just impact the warrior, it rendered the skull into pieces. The blow collapsed the skull of warrior and the force continued on, destroying its neck, chest and upper vertebrae. The backlash of the strike drove Richter off of his feet, his head striking a branch and knocking him unconscious.

His next sensation was of a very small hand slapping him across the face. This did not bother him very much, but the follow-up backhand across the other cheek just seemed rude and excessive. Blinking back to consciousness, he clearly said, "Skop furgin hidin mi uuu fookene men e me!"

"Quit laying around. Time to get back to work."

Taking several slow, deep breaths, Richter finally controlled his own personal spinning universe and sat up. Sion stood beside him. In front of him, was the ruined frame of the skeleton warrior. Still dazed, Richter looked around hoping that the danger had passed, but not yet able to fully muster the ability to care.

Sion looked at him with a confused expression, “What is FML?”

CHAPTER 15



When Richter was finally able to stand, he searched the warrior. The skeletal warrior had been clad in rags. The only thing of value was its axe.

You have found: Steel battle axe. Damage 17-22. Durability 17/40. Item class: Common. Quality: Average. Weight 13.7 kg. Requirement: Strength 19.

Richter really missed mobs dropping random loot. Having to search the dead was a pain in the butt compared simply opening an inventory window. To be fair though it wasn't really realistic to find a

bottle of fire resistance inside of a bear, or a healing herb from killing an air elemental.

The walked back to the cave entrance both gnawing on healing herbs. The herbs did not have the instant healing of Richter's Minor Ring of Healing. They also didn't heal as much or as fast as the potions they had found. Instead they slowly added health at one point per second.

Basic healing herb: Eating this will restore 10 points of health over 30 seconds.

A benefit of all that hide and seek in the mist was a bump in his stealth skill.

Congratulations: You have reached skill level 4 in Stealth. 2% increase to Concealment.

They gathered the other weapons and shields from the destroyed skeletons, and left them in a pile at the entrance. Like the warrior, these skeletons had nothing of value besides their weapons. A quick scan by Futen found no other enemies in the immediate vicinity. Moving into the cave, they swept up the remaining weapons placing them with the others.

They entered the tunnel connecting the two chambers, Richter took the lead, sword in hand. If Futen had missed some creature, then there would only be a split second to defend himself, not nearly enough time to aim and shoot his bow. Sion followed two paces behind, arrow nocked and ready. He moved carefully into the second cavern. As soon as he placed his foot down inside the chamber, the floor at his feet began to glow blue white.

“Move,” Sion shouted! The sprite grabbed the back of Richter’s belt and pulled. Unfortunately Sion lacked the strength to actually move him back, but it did stop him from moving any farther forward. The light flared and with a *zzzsst,* bolts of electricity shot into the air bouncing off the sides of the hallway.

Both he and Sion fell to the ground

You are stunned for the next 3.0 seconds!

Richter’s body was locked in spasm, pain coursing through him. He saw that whatever had just happened, had also removed 35 health. The next three seconds felt like an hour. Even after the paralysis wore off, they lay on the ground for a bit.

“Thaatttt suckkked!”

“I think I will move in front from here on out, Richter!” Sion’s voice was tight with pain and annoyance.

“Fine! Futen, what WAS that?”

“You seem to have stepped upon a lightning ward my Lord.”

“Why didn’t you warn us?”

“I was only scanning for enemies. Though in retrospect, it would have been prudent to also look for traps.”

“You think?!” Richter was almost shouting.

“Yes, my Lord,” the remnant paused for a second, “I do.”

“Pink would be too good for you, you damn night light! I’m going to find a way to make you burnt ochre! Now scan for traps!”

“Yes, my Lord.”

The orb flowed around the room occasionally hovering in one place. A circle would slowly appear on the floor to the side of its position. Richter noticed that not even the remnant passed directly over the wards. Each ward was two feet in diameter and had small runes lining the inner edge of its circumference. In the meantime, both he and Sion ate more healing herbs. Herb Lore certainly did come in handy as a skill. If not for finding these herbs in the forest,

the only options for accelerated healing would have been his ring or the two healing potions they had found. Thankfully the herbs were sprinkled throughout the forest, and they had been able to pick some each night.

Richter had the bright idea of eating two at once, hoping for an increase in the heal to time ratio. He had found that the herbs would simply restore 20 points over 60 seconds. Well, beggars can't be choosers, he thought. Eating the herbs had the added benefit of slowly improving his Herb Lore skill. Sion assured him he would get better results from each healing herb as his Herb Lore improved, and he would also have an easier time finding more potent herbs.

In the time that it took for the herbs to do their work, Futen had completed his search of the room and was hovering in front of him again. Richter certainly felt better, even if he was a bit a hungry. Sion told him that was a common side effect of the green medicinals.

Three circles, each the uniform two feet in diameter, were glowing softly scattered throughout the room. These were easily avoided but the last was three feet in diameter and had a second line of runes inside of the first. It also completely covered the entrance to a set of stairs leading down.

“Okay, so how do we get past it,” Richter asked, “Should we jump over? Can you make it?” the last was directed at Sion.

Sion looked back at him, “It’s a magical seal of power. It’s meant as a barrier and a trap.”

“Yeah, I have picked that up,” Richter replied.

“Yes, well,” Sion said slowly. “It wouldn’t be very good at either if it could be defeated by, skipping.”

Feeling like a moron, Richter just gave a short nod. He really didn’t know what he had done to deserve a best friend who was basically a dickish Kebler elf.

“Futen, what can you do about those wards?”

“These are lightning wards my Lord. Lightning is the province of Air magic. I should be able to unravel the ward and allow the energy to dissipate. Also you might be able to set off the ward from a distance with a sufficiently strong magical strike.”

“Are you saying that I can learn lightning magic?”

“Yes my Lord. As you know, you can learn and master Life, Dark, Air and Water magic thanks to the Place of Power. Each Power has certain requirements that must be met, but it is possible.”

Richter had noticed a Magic tab on his interface, but as they were all greyed out he had not paid it much attention. He could see now that there were a list of lightning spells below the air spells. The weakest lightning spell required skill level 10 in Air Magic.

“Why didn’t the skeletons set off the ward when they crossed it,” Sion asked.

“The wards are cast to attack only the enemies of those determined by the caster,” Futen replied.

“Can you change the way we are ‘determined’ by the ward? Can you make us be seen as friendlies, and everything else be seen as an enemy?”

“No, my Lord.”

“Well that’s a shame,” Richter said. “Judging by how strong these enemies were on the first floor. I can only imagine what the next level is going to be like. Okay Futen, disarm it.”

Both he and Sion took a step back, being a bit wary of the remnant’s judgement after their, well, electrocution. The ward began to glow. The outer circle of runes began to turn, followed by the second. Both changed directions multiple times reminding Richter of the tumblers on a safe. A few more turns and both circles stopped

rotating. There was a final flare of light and the ward floated up into the air until it dissipated like smoke and disappeared.

Richter began to move down the stairs, until Sion cleared his throat. The sprite cocked his head as if to say ‘Really?’ What the sprite actually said was, “We have been over this. Futen, scout ahead.”

It phased out of visible sight, and Sion and Richter were left waiting. The orb reappeared before long and said, “There is one large chamber. At the end are a set of black doors. In front of it are two of the larger skeletons. ”

“What type of weapons do they have,” Richter asked.

“One is carrying a large axe and the other a larger sword. They seem alert, my Lord.”

“Well that’s not surprising. A deaf bat could have heard all the racket we were making,” Richter commented. “If there are only two though we can take them. How far from the steps are they?”

“About eighty yards, my Lord.”

“Is there light?”

“Very little.”

“Then the plan is the same as before. Go in front of us, and draw their attention with sound and light. Sion, we both hit the one on the left with powered strikes, and once it is down or they cross more than half the distance to the steps, we retreat back up the stairs. If they follow, we will stagger our shots. You strike and knock it back, retreat, and I will do the same. If they get to close we retreat to the mist.”

Sion took the lead moving noiselessly down the steps. The waited a few steps up from the bottom, so as not to be seen. When they saw the flash, Richter and Sion both moved. Richter used Focus to draw his target close into view and powered his arrow for three seconds and released. Sion’s arrow struck a moment before him. The damn thing was still standing! At least the strikes had kept it from making any forward progress, however. Analyze showed:

Skeleton Warrior: Lvl 11. Health 230/350. Mana 0. Stamina 240/240.

Well that would be why! Meanwhile, Sion kept launching powered strike after powered strike into the already injured skeleton. The other skeleton warrior was halfway down the cavern. Richter switched his aim to it and powered his arrow for one second before releasing. The arrow struck the skeleton in the arm, flinging it off balance its greatsword scraping the ground.

Richter had underestimated the speed and strength of the warriors. The tactic of withering fire would not work. The skeletons would run them down and strike from behind. Richter fired one more imbued arrow at the closest skeleton further knocking it off balance and then drew his short sword. Stepping forward, he swung down as hard as he could and struck the greatsword, knocking the weapon out of the skeleton's bony grasp. The warrior raked its outstretched hand across Richter's chest creating an ear splitting screech as it scored his chest plate. Spinning low, Richter swung his sword in an arc striking the warrior in its knee. A chip fell off, but the leg remained attached. The warrior fell upon him, and it's not inconsiderable weight drove him onto his back. The bones clearly had greater density than they should. He grabbed one bony wrist, but its other dug into Richter's shoulder. The tips of its fingers pierced his flesh. It dug deeper into the meat of his muscle as it curled its fingers into a partial fist, on the inside of his body!

A scream ripped from Richter's throat as he struggled against the skeleton. His left hand scrambled for purchase against it, but was weakened to the point of uselessness with the skeleton's fingers inside his deltoid. His other hand tried to keep the skeleton's free hand from ripping into his throat and taking his life. Richter looked up

into the insane grin of the skeleton with its mouth partially open. His stamina was running out fast and he felt himself weakening. Panic was taking over which might have been the only thing keeping the pain from rendering him unconscious.

He strained with creature for long moments panting, caught in a stalemate that he knew could not last much longer. Just when he felt he might succumb, he saw Sion's sword dig point first into the side of the warrior's neck vertebrae. The sprite had jumped onto the skeleton's back. With his sword wedged into its spine, Sion wrenched up with all of his strength using his blade like a lever. With a heave and an audible snap, the bones of the neck separated. The head went flying, and the rest of the body collapsed into its separate parts on top of him. The hand remained intact and inside of him though. Sion placed his knee on Richter's chest, pulling swiftly, and wrench the skeletal fingers out of his friend's shoulder. A large amount of blood and a few pieces of flesh came out as well. Richter could barely see straight as he reached into his pouch drank one of the red potions he had taken from the goblin chief in the fight that already seemed so long ago. He triggered the healing ring as well. The pain began to lessen but his health did not seem to recover as

quickly as it should. He saw a symbol in the shape of a red tear drop at the corner of his vision. Focusing on he it saw:

You are bleeding. You will lose three health per second for the next fourteen seconds.

Well that explains that. Sion handed him several healing herbs and he stuffed all three into his mouth chewing, trying to ignore the bitter flavor. He swallowed them all as quickly as possible. It seemed the potion and herbs would work in conjunction allowing for increased health regeneration over a period of time. For the next few minutes Richter sat in pain waiting for his wounds to heal. Sion stood nearby staring at the tall black doors at the end of the hall, but no further enemies appeared.

“Futen.”

“Yes, my Lord.”

“Are we going to run out of time? Will the skeletons that we have killed come back if we don’t move fast enough?”

“No, my Lord. Some dungeons are indeed bound with a power that brings back any vanquished enemies quickly, but this dungeon is fixed. Unless you leave the dungeon for a prolonged period, slain

enemies will not reappear. I cannot give any assurance of new enemies wandering in, however."

"Do you mean more skeletons could be coming from outside," Richter asked with alarm in his voice.

"Yes, my Lord. I have been scanning for enemies as instructed however, and have detected no hostile creatures other than the skeletons you have encountered."

Not fully reassured, he tried for a bit of levity. "You seem to make a habit of jumping onto enemy's backs, buddy," Richter said.

"Only because you seem to be making a habit of lying on you back with big things on top of you. You should stop that. It's no way to find love," Sion replied, a cocky grin spreading across his face.

"Shut up! I'm still healing," Richter groaned.

Despite suffering not only wounds, but also Sion's twisted humor, there was a bright side to the fight. Upon the death of the warriors Richter was award with:

TRING!

You have reached level 7! Through hard work you have moved forward along your path. As a Chaos Seed you gain 6 points to

distribute to characteristics instead of the usual 4. You also get 25% advancement to the skill of your choice! Crush your enemies, honor your allies, LIVE!

Congratulations! You have reached skill level 3 in Imbue Arrow. +5% damage. +5% speed of mana flow.

Richter wasted no time and allocated the necessary points needed to use the charm spell. Two points went into Intelligence, two into Charisma and the last two he placed into Dexterity. The increased attack speed of the sprite could not be underestimated. His 25% proficiency increase he held off, as none his skills was far enough along to level.

Richter pulled out the spell book. The blurry lines that were on the page the last time he had looked at it resolved into clear text. He began to read and quickly finished the first page. The next page turned of its own volition. After he read it the process repeated. This happened faster and faster until the turning pages were a breeze on his face. With the last page done, the book slammed shut and crumpled to dust.

Congratulations! You have learned the spell: Charm! You can convince a target that they hold you in the highest regard. If cast on an enemy during battle they will fight for you. Casting this upon a

creature lowers their regard for you after the spell wears off. This is a spell of Life. Cost 60 mana. Duration: 1 hour. Range: 20 feet. Cast Time: 1 second. Cooldown: 10 minutes.

Congratulations! You have learned the skill: Life Magic.

His wound closed while he learned the spell. Richter stood and looked at the black doors. It was time to finish this.

“Can you scout what’s inside Futen?”

“No, my Lord, not until the door is opened.”

“Well then, no point waiting around. Let’s do what we came for! Futen, as soon as we open the door, illuminate the room, and find any traps as quickly as possible. Sion, kill stuff,” Richter said, getting a viscious smile in return from his Companion.

Striding to the end of the chamber, Richter flung open the doors and moved inside. Futen lit the room, hovering above their heads. A black altar was in the middle of the room. A skeleton stood behind it wearing black robes and holding a long staff. The staff appeared to one large bone. It was at least five feet long, and was blue in color. The top of it had spiderweb cracks that were black in color. Small spheres of black light shone in the center of the skeletons eye sockets leaving no doubt that it was staring directly at them. It was

flanked by two skeletal warriors both holding greatswords. Next to the priest though, was the show stopper. A grayish humanoid creature sat on haunches wearing tattered rags as a loincloth. It had weeping skin and festering sores. The stench coming off of it was horrible and overwhelming. It looked up at them with animal like intelligence, arching its back as it prepared to leap.

“A ghoul,” Sion shouted.

The robed skeleton waved its hand, and the doors slammed shut with an ominous boom, locking them in.

Then Richter heard something even more disturbing from his Companion.

“Fuck my life!”

CHAPTER 16



“Don’t let the ghoul touch you,” Sion shouted, “it can paralyze.” The sprite drew, knocked and imbued an arrow, firing it at the closest skeleton warrior. He then switched to the other warrior. His shots made a constant staccato, buying time before they could close the distance, and bring their horrible strength to bear. Richter fired his golden arrow at the skeleton mage, but a blue disc of hazy energy appeared from the tip of staff. It acted as a shield. His arrow stopped well short of the skeletal mage creating a loud bang, but having little other effect. The ghoul had jumped over the altar, and was quickly closing the distance to Richter.

Putting all of his faith in his new spell, Richter cast out his hand and invoked Charm. The one second cast time allowed the ghoul to leap. It was in the air by the time Richter had finished the incantation. Its jump easily crossed the remaining distance between them. The stinking weight of its body crushed Richter into the wall. He held his arms out ready to wrestle the creature to the ground, but it easily gave ground. It simply stood there staring at him. With a grim smile on his face he pointed to the skeleton mage, “Sick’em boy!”

The ghoul rushed at the mage who had been chanting a spell that would almost definitely have ruined Richter’s whole day. The mage was forced to break off its spell to fire a bolt of frost at the ghoul knocking it to the side. Unfortunately, the caster did not seem fazed by spell feedback from the interrupted spell.

Richter pulled his attention from the two fighting monsters. He drew and fired upon the skeletons that were perilously close to Sion. His attack pulled the attention of the axe wielding warrior. The energy seemed to flow easier than before, his increase in Imbue Arrow level making a small but perceptible difference. He was able to land two strikes on the warrior before it took a swing at him. Ducking under the blow, he planted his feet and rammed it with his shoulder, knocking it back a step. He quickly nocked another arrow and fired at

point blank range directly into its face. He had not had time to Imbue the arrow, but the shot still connected solidly with its skull. It fell upon its back with a loud clatter. Standing over it, he charged his arrow, and shot at the connection of its neck and body. The skull flew free and the bones lost cohesion.

Looking to Sion, the sprite was dodging his opponent's swings with no chance of counterattack. Drawing a bead on the warrior, Richter imbued his arrow, then shouted "Drop down!"

Sion rolled to the right to avoid the skeleton's sword leaving Richter a clear shot. He took it, and the second skeleton dropped into a pile of bones. Turning his attention back to the altar he heard a piteous shriek. The skeleton mage had plunged its staff into the chest of the ghoul. The creature still struggled to reach the mage and rend it with its claws, but ice began to spread from where the staff had pierced its body. After only three seconds, the ice had completely frozen its torso. With a sharp twist, the skeleton freed its staff. The sudden jerk sent the two halves of the ghoul's body in different directions. Blue and red icy shards fell in a tinkling sound around the base of the altar.

Hoping to catch the mage off balance, Richter drew an arrow, imbued it and released. He didn't have Sion's speed though. The

seconds that it took to do so was enough to allow the mage to erect his shield again. The shot was stopped feet away, splashing harmlessly against the blue circle. Sion regained his feet and fired an arrow, but with a pulse of power from the staff, the circle widened in diameter, blocking his shot as well.

“Flank it,” Richter shouted, not letting up on his rate of fire as he moved to the right. Seeing Sion’s confusion, he exhaled in frustration and shouted again, “Move to the other side and keep shooting!” They both kept hammering at the skeleton’s shield moving to either side to get past its defenses. With another flare from its staff, the shield grew into a sphere covering it from all directions. It now had a distinctly softer shade of blue, however. They continued firing Imbued shots. It was clear that it was a race to see who would run out of mana first, the Companions or the skeleton mage.

Taking a moment, Richter swallowed his mana potion. While Sion continued the assault, Richter powered his arrow for one, two, three, four, five and now six seconds. The black streaks flowed thick over the golden arrow, and Richter felt the magic begin to flare out of control. Not able to wait any longer, he released. The arrow hit the sphere, but unlike the previous shots, the magic surrounding it did not immediately wink out. The arrow seemed to push at the

protective sphere, bowing it in. The sphere buckled, and then, in a torrent of light and sound, it exploded. The eruption knocked both Sion and Richter backwards to the ground. Blinking clear the spots in his vision, Richter quickly made his way back to the altar. The skeleton was laying on its back, frozen. This time, apparently the spell backlash had stunned the mage. It was helpless for a few moments. Unsheathing his sword, Richter delivered the coup de grace, severing its head. Looking down, he saw the dark light fade from its eye sockets.

Congratulations! You have cleared your first dungeon! Bonus +500 XP!

Congratulations! You have finished the quest: Unlock your Power I. You have found and cleansed a site of ancient magic. As Master of the local Place of Power you may choose one of the Powers that comprise your domain. Your options are Life, Dark, Air or Water. Make your choice to close the quest. Reward: 3,000 XP.

Choosing a Power will give you 50% effectiveness increase to spells of that branch. You will also have 50% resistance to spells of that Power. Unique to being a Master of a Place of Power, however, is your access to each Power's specialized ability.

Life Ability: “Bounty of Life” +30% growth for the physical manifestation of your Place of Power
Dark Ability: “Hidden Treasures” +30% yield from treasure
Air Ability: “Winds of Change” +30% rate to skill advancement
Water Ability: “Tranquil Soul” -30% mana cost for spells

Richter’s exhaustion was overwhelmed by his excitement! He closed his eyes and smiled. While Imbue Arrow was by far his most useful skill so far, what had drawn him to RPGs, then MMORPGs and finally VRMMORPGs was a desire to wield magic! The only reason he had played the character Sion was that his best friends had pigeon holed him early on to choose a rogue character. They had said it would round out the group. Even though he never told them, he had a couple other accounts that let him throw lightning bolts and cast curses with the best of them!

Being a Master was amazingly powerful. It basically made him a magical tank! While the bonus 50% resistance and spell power was awesome, it wasn’t really a huge surprise. The abilities though, might be real game changers! It made choosing one of the four so much more complicated! He focused upon his four choices in the prompt, but no further information offered itself. Oh for want of a Wiki! Based on the games he had played in the past, Dark Magic was the often

the province of curses, summons for certain creatures, concealment spells and direct damage. Air magic usually dealt with haste, weather and electricity. Water magic typically slowed enemies, used ice based attacks, and some emotion based magic. Life magic of course dealt with healing, but also blessings, death wards and protection spells.

What should I do, Richter thought with some anxiety! It occurred to him, after a second, that this was not exactly Sophie's choice. Unlocking all four of his Powers was now a serious priority, and something he would definitely achieve! The real question was, what would help him the most at this present moment.

Now his Charm spell had saved the day, there was no doubt about it. If the ghoul had resisted the spell, both he and Sion would probably be dead right now. A 50% bump in its power would seriously juice up the spell! Even high level enemies would probably succumb. Also increased growth for his village would be clutch! On the other hand, he wasn't really ready to take advantage of the bonus yet.

Dark Magic would certainly be powerful. Also, the Hidden Treasures ability was insanely tempting. 30% better loot, for like, ever! He knew people that would sell their grandma for that! You also

couldn’t discount Tranquil Soul. 30% less mana needed for ANY spell?!? It was a magician’s wet dream!

But then there was Air Magic. The power of haste and lightning spells. Maybe even flying or instant transport? Ultimately it was the Air Ability that made the decision for him. The Winds of Change Ability just seemed like the natural complement to his already existing Limitless ability. He could already learn any skill, how could he resist knowing that he would learn everything 30% faster? He made his choice.

You have chosen Mastery of Air!

Congratulations! You have obtained the Ability: Winds of Change. All skills are obtained 30% faster.

Congratulations! You are a Master of Air Magic. All Air spells cast by you are 50% stronger. You have 50% resistance to Air magic. You can teach the skill Air Magic to anyone with over a 50% affinity for the skill. You can teach specific Air spells to anyone with the appropriate skill level to learn them.

Congratulations! You have learned the skill: Air Magic. Increasing your skill will allow you to cast more advanced spells.

Congratulations! You have learned the spell: Haste! This spell will increase the speed of the target. This is a spell of Air. Cost 25 mana. Duration: 10 min. Range: 5 feet. Cast Time: 1 second. Cooldown: N/A.

Congratulations! You have learned the spell Errant Wind! Increase the dodge of your party to projectiles. This spell will only work when you are outside. This is a spell of Air. Cost 50 mana. Duration: 20 min. Range: 50. Cast Time: 4 seconds. Cooldown: 45 min.

You have been awarded 5,000 XP for your new Mastery.

TRING!

You have reached level 8! Through hard work you have moved forward along your path. As a Chaos Seed you gain 6 points to distribute to characteristics instead of the usual 4. You also get 25% advancement to the skill of your choice! Crush your enemies, honor your allies, LIVE!

You have either characteristic points or skill percentage points to allocate from the previous level. Now that you have progressed again, you must allocate your points within the next week or they will randomly be assigned for you.

Congratulations! You have unlocked the quest: Unlock Your Power II. Requirement: Level 10.

The prompts almost brought a tear to his eye. Instead he settled for a, “Hell yeah!” Sion looked at him like he was crazy. He laughed and said, “Don’t worry. It’ll grow on you!” He hadn’t known that he couldn’t store points indefinitely. He would have to be aware of that in the future. He calmed his excitement and looked at his new spells. As with the Charm spell, he suddenly just had the knowledge. He knew he could cast the spells as if he had studied them for a great period of time. That brought him to… “Futen,” Richter said loudly, “How do I teach the spells that I know?”

“Simply place your hands on the desired recipient, and will the knowledge to them. For higher level spells there may be additional requirement, but the level one spells you have learned will only require your will, and that the recipient have at least 50% affinity for that branch of magic.”

It sounded too easy, “Can anyone teach magic,” Richter asked.

“No my Lord, as you progress in skill levels, your rank progresses as well. Levels 1-9 you are a Novice. Then levels 10-24 you are an Initiate, levels 25-44 an Apprentice, and levels 45-69 you are awarded the rank of Journeyman. After Journeyman, you reach

the rank of Adept, and remain there until level 100. Level one hundred on, you are a Master. In days past, there were stories of Grandmasters, rank 150 and above, but I have never met any that I can recall. Only Adepts and Masters can teach spells without the use of spell books. Spellbooks are time consuming and costly to produce, and may require rare ingredients. Even still, only Journeyman level and above can create spellbooks. It is obviously preferable to learn a spell directly from and Adept or Master. As Master of a Place of Power, you gain the abilities of a Master despite your skill level being less than 100."

"What about the 50% bonus to power and resistance?"

"Each rank confers certain bonuses. It varies depending on the skill being examined, but magical ranks typically follow the same pattern. Novice rank conveys nothing. The following ranks convey a certain amount of protection and power. Initiate 5%, Apprentice rank 10%, Journeyman 20%, Adept 35%, and Master rank the 50% that you have received, my Lord.

Things now much clearer, Richter turned to Sion, "Please come here my friend," Sion walked closer with a confused expression. "You have stood by me through death and danger. We definitely had a rocky start. You let me be eaten. I, well… I pretty much bitch slapped

you in front everyone you have ever known. Haha." Sion gave him a stone face at first, but then chuckled a bit. Richter continued, "The point is you are my best friend in this whole world, and I help my friends. I have learned Air Magic. I would like to try and teach it to you."

"Air Magic has never been the province of my people," Sion replied with a guarded expression. "The Hearth Mother has never been able to kindle Life, Earth or Light magic in me."

"You never know until you try. I have never believed that someone else could tell me what I could or could not do. I won't let my only friend in the world be told what he can't do either, even if he's the one doing the telling."

Sion stared at him for a moment, then stepped forward closing the distance between them. He looked intently into Richter's face as if searching for something. What Richter saw in his friend's face was desperate hope. Richter had a moment of grand realization. Sion wanted magic! Hisako had apparently tried to teach him all of the Powers associated with the Hearth Tree, but he must have lacked affinity with all of them. It would only be natural for the son of a Master of Power to want to become a Master himself. Was Imbue Arrow the closest the sprite had come to using his mana?

Richter decided it was time to try again. Even if Air magic wouldn't work, he wouldn't rest until he helped his friend feel complete. There were three other powers affiliated with his Place of Power, if Air didn't work. Knowing instinctually what to do, he placed his left hand upon the sprites head and his right on his friend's chest. The words came unbidden to his lips, "By the Right of My Power, I Awaken Your Power." A warmth began in Richter's chest. It reminded him of freedom, wild destruction and gentle rain. It grew from his heart and down both arms to the ends of his hands. The energy flowed into the sprite and found what could only be described as a resonance. The Power found a home in the sprite's mind and soul. Sion's eyes widened and tears cascaded down his face.

"Not Life, nor Earth, no Light could I learn. I saw my mother's gift pass to others, but never did her magic awaken anything inside of me. I tried not to envy or hate. I tried not to let my discontent ruin the harmony of our home, but all knew," Sion's voice began to quaver with repressed emotion, and so he took a moment to compose himself. When he spoke again there was a certainty to his words, "I am with you for life, my Lord."

Your relationship with your Companion Sion has improved from friendly to Ally. Sion will fight with you and for you until death, and if

he can find a way back through the veil, will fight for you again.

“Sion! You are my friend. I have to put up with this ‘my Lord’ stuff from Futen, but not from you! I need my friend,” Richter said almost pleadingly.

“And that I am,” Sion replied sticking out his arm. Richter returned the gesture, and they clasped wrists sharing a quiet moment.

“Well enough of all of that, nobody likes a sissy,” Richter said gruffly. Seeing Sion’s confused look he realized he needed to devote some time to teaching his friend slang and swear words. They had to be at least as important as magic! “I’ll tell you later,” he said with a chuckle. Walking up to the skeleton mage he began to search the body.

You have found: Novice ice mage robes. Defense + 5 (additional +7 vs magical attack). Durability 14/20. Item class: Common. Quality: Average. Weight 3.7 kg.

You have found: 2 gold coins, 19 silver coins and 55 copper coins.

You have found: Magic staff: Attack 12-15. Durability 17/25. Item class: Uncommon. Quality: Above Average. Weight 5.1 kg.

Looking at Futen, he held up the staff. The orb took the hint and flared white. The identified item's information flashed into Richter's mind.

You have found: Corrupted staff of the Ice Wizard. Attack 12-15. Durability 17/25. Item class: Uncommon. Quality: Above Average. Weight 5.1 kg. Traits: -10% cost of Water spells. Must have negative alignment to use.

Sion pulled out his sword, and approached the ghoul.

"What are you doing," Richter asked.

"The ghoul's heart is a useful potion component."

Leaving the sprite to his gruesome task, he was about to collect the weapons from the warriors when Futen spoke. "Are you going to take the altar, my Lord?"

Looking at the large black stone, he asked, "How? That thing must weigh a couple tons? And what's it good for anyway?"

"The Magic Core of the altar has many uses. The skeletal mage was using it to focus his power. That is why he was able to resist your strikes for as long as he did, it was acting like a mana fount that he could tap into."

“Well I still don’t know how to take it. It’s huge! ”

“Again, it is only the core you need, my Lord. You have taken control of dungeon by slaying its boss. Simply place you hand on the altar, and you will gain access to the interface.”

Putting his hand on the black altar he suddenly he was able to access the information.

Dark Altar. Lvl 1. Provides 100 mana per day.

The interface had only a few basic prompts, unlike the many options for the Mist Village. Two that caught his interest were, “Access mana” and “Remove Core.”

Richter’s eyes narrowed for a moment. ‘Access mana?’ “Oh Futen? Is there a way for me to personally use the mana that the Mist Village makes? Say to power my Imbue Arrow? You know, so I don’t run out of mana and almost die because of it?!”

“Yes, my Lord.”

Praying for patience he asked, “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Oh,” the remnant paused. “I thought that was obvious.”

He didn’t fight it this time.

“Gaaaahhhhhhh!!!!!!!!”

CHAPTER 17



It turned out the magical core was a clockwork sphere. Through the gaps in mechanism, red and white light shone through, and the feeling of a strong electric field was palpable when held. It wasn't an unpleasant feeling, more like feeling static in the air. The description of the item was written in gold lettering upon the prompt. It was the first time he had seen this. The common items he had found were white, uncommon blue, and rare was written in red. It appeared that golden items were epic! Fingers crossed he could figure out the color of legendary and artifact items soon.

You have found: Magic Core. Durability 15,000/15,000. Item class: Epic. Quality: Masterwork. Weight: 12.7 kg. Magical Cores can be used to power any number of devices.

A few more questions to Futen revealed that he could access the mana generated by the Place of Power anywhere within the boundaries of his domain, an area of roughly eighty square miles. The benefits of increasing the level of his village were becoming clearer. The higher the level, the greater the reach of his magic, and the more mana he could personally access. Even with the village at level 1, the 1000 mana available was the equivalent of investing one hundred points into Intelligence!

Excited about the possibilities, Richter loaded the ponies with the loot from their battle, and made their way back to the village. During the journey he invested his new skill points and examined both his and Sion's current status. He placed two points in Intelligence, two points into Constitution, and two more into Dexterity.

Name: Richter
Age: 24
Level: 8, 41%
Health: 160 **Mana: 180** **Stamina: 160**
Strength: 15
Agility: 17
Dexterity: 30
Constitution: 16
Endurance: 16
Intelligence: 18
Wisdom: 10

Charisma: 18
Luck: 14
Abilities:
- **Limitless**
- **Gift of Tongues**
- **Winds of Change**

Skills:
- **Herb Lore Lvl 3; 92% to next level, 100% affinity**
- **Potions Lvl 1; 0% to next level, 100% affinity**
- **Analyze Lvl 1; 77% to next level, 100% affinity**
- **Stealth Lvl 4; 49% to next level, 100% affinity**
- **Archery Lvl 4; 85% to next level, 100% affinity**
  - **Imbue Arrow Lvl 3; 93% to next level, 100% affinity**
  - **Focus Lvl 1; 76% to next level, 100% affinity**
- **Swordsmanship Lvl 1; 73% to next level, 100% affinity**
- **Small Blades Lvl 1; 0% to next level, 100% affinity**
- **Light Armor Lvl 2; 88% to next level, 100% affinity**
- **Air Magic Lvl 1; 0% to next level, 100% affinity**
- **Life Magic Lvl 1; 11% to next level, 100% affinity**

Marks:
- **Master of Mist Village**

Resistances:
- **Air 50%**
- **Mental 15%**
- **Spiritual 15%**

Race: Human (Chaos Seed)
Reputation: Lvl 1 “Who are you again?”
Alignment: Neutral
Language: All

Name: Sion
Age: 44
Level: 8, 71% to next level
Health: 210 Mana: 180 Stamina: 120
Strength: 17
Agility: 18
Dexterity: 46
Constitution: 16
Endurance: 12
Intelligence: 18
Wisdom: 13
Charisma: 9
Luck: 12
Abilities:
- **Wood Craft**
- **Forest Concealment**

Skills:
- **Herb lore Lvl 3, 40% to next level, 91% affinity**

Potions Lvl 3, 31% to next level, 88% affinity
Archery Lvl 10; 22% to next level, 88% affinity
Imbue Arrow Lvl 5, 11% to next level, 74% affinity
Tracking Lvl 5; 51% to next level, 93% affinity
Swordsmanship Lvl 8, 79% to next level, 81% affinity
Light Armor Lvl 4, 79% to next to next level, 65% affinity
Air Magic Lvl 1; 0% to next level, 93% affinity

Marks:

None

Resistances:

Life 10%
Earth 10%
Light 10%

Race: Wood Sprite
Reputation: Lvl 1 “Who are you again?”
Alignment: +2
Language: Sprite, Common Tongue

His friend had increased several of his skills. That was expected, but what was interesting to Richter were his affinities. If Richter remembered correctly, Sion’s affinities had been a bit higher last time he had checked his status page. If the sprite was any indication, then it appeared that for most people and creatures, as they leveled up their affinity decreased. It meant there was a theoretical ceiling for everyone in how far they could progress that would vary from person to person and skill to skill. If his ability to teach Air Magic was any indication, a skill could not even be learned if a person’s affinity was less than 50%. Richter was finally starting to truly appreciate his ability. The potential for Limitless was, well, limitless!

The trip back to village was uneventful, but they were thankfully able to find several more healing herbs. Arriving back, Richter placed the magic core in the vault. He was sure that it was worth a fortune, but he equally sure it could greatly increase the power of his village down the road. An item of that was epic class and masterwork quality had to come in handy!

The staff seemed like it could be powerful in the right hands, but the corruption severely limited its usefulness. Richter really didn't understand the importance of alignment yet. It was easy to think that negative was bad and positive was good, but he had a feeling it was more nuanced. Sion was positive alignment, but his people had shoot on sight orders for anyone in their territory. Not exactly a cute and cuddly policy. Despite being unsure of what it all meant, he still wasn't in a rush to equip a creature of negative alignment. Maybe he could purify it though.

"Futen, can the corruption on this staff be removed?"

"Yes my Lord, either Light or Life magic can be used to remove corruption. One of the few magics available at Level 1 of the village is curse removal. The cost is 200 mana. Would you like to use it?"

"Yes, do it. No wait! I will do it myself."

“Very well, my Lord. The spell will have a higher likelihood of success if you cast it in the room with the Great Seal.”

“Why,” Richter asked.

“Just as the village is the physical manifestation of your Place of Power, the Great Seal is the physical representation. That is why it has the strength to keep monsters of the catacombs at bay. Though your domain extends beyond this village as we discussed, your powers will always be greatest at the core.”

Richter nodded, then climbed the small hill that led to the Great Seal. When he got there he was somewhat surprised. The mosaic had changed. At least part of it had. The clear spiral that was set in the floor had changed from tiles to a solid piece of crystal. It was now shining a faint light. The other three arms remained the same. It appeared that when Richter had claimed his power it had awakened part of the design. He felt a faint thrum in the room that had not been there previously. He walked to the center of the Great Seal. A quick check showed that most of the mana from casting Confusing Mist was restored. He then found the proper spell under the village interface and cast it.

Motes of light began to fill the chamber they were standing in. They coalesced around the staff, and when they disappeared, the

black stains that had been present at the end were gone. It was also the clear blue of artic ice now, rather than the opaque blue it had been before. Examining it again he found it had increased in strength.

Staff of the Ice Wizard. Attack 14-18. Durability 30/30. Item class: Uncommon. Quality: Above Average. Weight 5.1 kg. Traits: -10% Cost to Water spells.

He checked his status page again, and saw that his progression in Life Magic had progressed from 11% to 49% just by casting one high level spell. Just another little perk of being a Master he supposed. Gotta love it when you can power level!

Sure that the staff would come in handy, Richter packed it on the ponies. He also loaded them with the better weapons they had found so far. Counting the coins from the chest that had been in the treasury, he found 55 gold coins, 215 silver, and 174 copper. Unfortunately he had no idea if he was a wealthy man or a pauper. Even though in the game a copper had equaled one dollar, Richter couldn’t trust that the conversion held true. A loaf of bread could be worth a gold coin for all he knew. Sion was no help in this. The wood sprites had a clearly xenophobic attitude, and didn’t mingle with the

humans of the neighboring kingdom. Richter would just have to figure it out on the way.

One thing was clear, it was time to grow his village, and that meant getting help. Even though he was chomping at the bit to unlock more of his Powers, the next quest required that he be at least two levels higher. Presumably the subsequent quests would have level requirements as well. Waiting around just wasn't he style! He needed to travel into the Kingdom of Yves to find people that would settle in his village.

Richter instructed Futen to continue collecting resources for when he returned. Futen surprisingly took some initiative, and told Richter about a nearby quarry that had provided the stone for the village in the past. There were several tasks Richter wanted Futen to attend to: quarrying the stone, harvesting iron from the mine, widening and deepening the trench surrounding the village and clearing trees for two hundred yards around the borders of the village. Warning the remnant to always leave enough mana to pay the Confusing Mist upkeep, he and Sion turned to leave. Futen gave his customary, "Yes, my Lord," and that was that.

The next day, Richter and Sion started on their journey through the forest. The basic plan was to follow Hisako's directions and head

west until they reached the edge of the forest. Using Tommy Lee Jones' math, a fugitive could move over uneven terrain at four mph. That fugitive was obviously not going through mountainous terrain and virgin forest! Even though they walked a solid twelve to fourteen hours a day, there was no way they traveled more than twenty five to thirty five miles before they rested for the night. Of course that didn't factor in having to backtrack around obstructions, their slowed pace with the ponies, or the most important issue. That was neither Richter nor Sion was as badass as the man that played Indiana Jones and Han Solo!

Sion didn't understand Richter's obsession with distances or hurrying. For the first few days it frustrated Richter to no end. The laissez faire attitude of the Wood Sprite was so… un-American. After that ridiculous thought, Richter realized made he was being a bit silly, and with a small laugh at himself, relaxed and decided to enjoy the journey.

They moved beyond the borders of the mist during the first day, and had no issues until the second night. A pack of wolves was seen that evening. They made camp early and built the fire high. The wolves started approaching, but lost interest after a sizeable portion of the lead wolf was turned into bloody chunks by Sion's Imbued

arrow. While not able to salvage the pelt, that night Richter discovered that wolf meat was quite tasty, despite being gamier than what he was used to. They were able to kill several rabbits, foxes and one small brown bear during their trip. They only hunted at the end of each day though, when they had time to skin the animals and dry the pelts over a low fire.

The first days they traveled along the small river that flowed by the village. It rejoined the larger river that Richter had followed upon arriving to The Land, and they continued west. In addition to hunting, they practiced their Haste spell as often as they could hoping to advance their skill. They both increased their Air magic by one level, Richter slightly ahead of Sion. The Herb Lore skill also increased for both of them gradually as they picked useful plants along their journey.

About a week into the journey, Sion suddenly motioned for him to lower himself to the ground. Tying up the ponies, they moved at a slow crawl to look over a drop off in front of them. Only fifteen feet away from the lip of the small cliff, there was a ten foot tall green humanoid eating a stag. It didn’t show any squeamishness as it reached into the animal’s body. Its oversized hands were tipped with thick claws and pulled meat and viscera indiscriminately into its maw.

The jaw must have been able to dislocate like a snakes because it shoved almost a whole leg into its mouth before chewing loudly, the sound of snapping bones clear. Richter used Analyze on it.

Mountain Troll, Lvl 22. Health: 1100/1100, Mana 0/0, Stamina 520/520.

Richter face froze into a twisted expression as if he had eaten something sour. Making eye contact with Sion, he motioned sharply with his head for them to leave. Sion gave him a perfect, ‘What the hell did you think we were going to do expression’ and nodded back. With slow deliberate moves, they eased back from the edge on their stomachs and then collected their mounts. They backtracked a good half an hour before setting on a path that would take them well wide of the creature. Sion later told him about the troll. The creatures were apparently brutally strong and fast. They were aggressive almost to the point of insanity. They were driven solely by the desire to feed. Worst though was that it regenerated so fast that even massive wounds didn’t slow it. Without dismembering it and then lighting it on fire, it would not stop until it had eaten you, most likely alive.

Though the troll was the greatest threat they came upon, it was not the only one. A few days later, while taking a break to eat, Sion was ranging around the campsite. It was a something he had a

tendency to do. Richter wasn't sure if constant movement was something endemic to the Wood Sprites or if Sion just had a bad case of ADD. Whichever was the case, his friend would often would scout in small circles around any area they paused at or stopped at for the night. This time Sion came back camp excited. "I need some time to do something. It might take a bit, is that all right?"

After Richter's nod, he pulled out his mortar and pestle and started grinding. Richter didn't recognize the herbs, but they made a greyish red paste. Sion scrapped it onto a piece of bark he cut from a nearby tree being careful not to get it onto his skin. He left camp again with no explanation, moving quickly back the way he had come.

Bemused but not concerned, Richter simply continued to relax. It was nice taking a bit of a longer break. Walking for days on end was not as glamorous and restful as it might seem. He laid on his back with his pack as a pillow, and looked up at the forest canopy and the snatches of blue sky that could be seen between the leaves. About twenty minutes later, Sion came back smiling broadly and said, "I found something. Come with me, I'll need your help."

Richter got to his feet, "Where are we going?"

"Just come, and leave the ponies. They will be safer here."

Not exactly sure what he meant by ‘safer,’ Richter just shrugged and did as he was asked. The two of them walked two hundred yards from where they had been eating. Sion stopped walking and pointed to a large dead tree. The trunk was about three meters wide and six meters high. The top was jagged and irregular, clearly only the base of a once much larger tree. There was a large hole at the bottom of the trunk leading down into the earth. The opening was about three feet tall. Richter could probably make his way into it, but it would be tight.

“Okay great. An old dead tree. Is it a long lost relative?”

Sion huffed in irritation, “No *gyoti*!” (The translation was something like ‘irritating fool’ as best as Richter could make out with his Gift of Tongues ability) “This was an Offshoot! It was the beginning of a Hearth Tree long ago. Something obviously happened.” Sion picked up the bark with the grey-red paste on it, and tossed it down the hole.

“But the Hearth Tree is huge,” Richter protested. “This thing is a toothpick in comparison!”

“That’s because our Hearth Tree is built on a Place of Power. Normally Hearth Trees are just the center of a Wood Sprite community, though a few Sprites may live within if it get big enough.”

“So finding this is like finding a piece of your history,” Richter asked. History had never really been his strong point. He still shuddered when he thought about the historical tours his grandmother would drag him on. At some point people just need to admit that looking at old homes in Gatlinburg is not that great!

“Yes, it is that,” Sion said with his previous excitement. He either did not pick up on or decided to ignore Richter’s nonplussed tone. And why not, he was just talking to a *gyoti* after all. “More important though, is that the Seed Core might still be viable!”

Richter just looked at him.

Sion peered at Richter from the corner of his eye, then looked back at the tree, then peered again this time with a small turn of his head, then looked back at the tree. This continued for a good five minutes, with Richter just staring at the sprite. The human’s stubborn resistance finally won out.

“Do you know what that means,” Sion asked exasperated.

“You know that I don’t! You knew before you said it, that I didn’t know what a Seed Core was! You could have just called it a mystical booty scratcher! I still wouldn’t know! Just tell me!”

“Fine! You humans are so cranky and impatient. A Seed Core…,” Sion paused for a moment, Richter was sure just to mess with him, “is how you make a Hearth Tree, a Guardian Wood or a host of other magical trees. One of the sacred duties of my people is to further the cause of good by growing magical trees for the betterment of all.”

“Oh, so it’s like a stem cell?”

Sion looked at him confused.

Richter gave his best sarcastic grin, “Not so fun when someone drops a term you don’t know, is it?” Changing his expression to one of gracious forbearance, he said, “You may continue.”

Grinding his teeth, Sion said, “The point is, the Hearth Tree only makes a Seed Core once every several hundred years, if that! If the Core is still viable, it will be a wonderful boon!”

“This tree looks like it has been dead for a long time, Sion. Why would you think that this Seed Core thing wasn’t dead too?”

“The Core is a source of great magical power. It gives to nature, but also is maintained by it. As long as its power is not drawn upon too much, or too fast, it can sustain itself almost indefinitely

“Okay, okay, I’m sold,” Richter said. “How do we check?”

“We simply need to go down into to the bowels of the tree, and see if we can find it. I should be able to feel a resonance if I am close enough. It will be a round sphere about yea big,” Sion held his hands apart showing something the size of a grapefruit.”

“Okay that won’t take that long. Let’s do it,” Richter said.

Sion looked at him a moment opening his mouth to speak, and then closing it again, looking indecisive.

“What is it,” Richter asked.

“Well, from the stories I have heard, if a Seed Core is ever left out for a long period of time, it has the tendency to attract monsters. The healing and regenerative properties of the Core can be used to make the monsters stronger, more resilient, or… bigger.”

“What do you mean exactly by bigger?”

“Just that. The elders told stories of giant ants or snakes. I’m sure that they were exaggerating. Besides, we don’t need to worry about that here.”

“Phew. For a second I thought we were going to be overrun with flesh eating beetles or something,” Richter said with a small laugh. He had never really been a big fan of bugs.

The sprite laughed in return. “No, no. There are no flesh eating beetles in the Forest of Nadria.” There was a short pause, “What we DO have is a viscious animal called a skeeling. It’s usually only about the size of a badger. It is completely blind, but has excellent hearing. It’s subterranean, and they don’t wander to the surface. It has ridged scales and a very distinctive smell. They have been known to burrow under trees and eat the roots, killing the tree. It’s a pest we try to get rid of whenever we can!

Richter nodded along, thinking it was remarkable that Sion had so much information about one forest creature, but wondering why he was focusing so much on it.

The sprite continued, “Now skeelings are mean and fast. They had two rows of sharp teeth that can tear through an animal in seconds! Luckily, they hate the extract of red vine mixed with iron leaf. It’s bad enough that it drives them out of their holes and above ground. Then they are easy to kill! Now when I was wandering earlier, I found this.” He tossed a flat palm sized rock to Richter. “I didn’t know what it was at first. It had ridges like a skeeling scale, but was way too big. Most scales on adult male skeelings are about the size of your thumbnail. Are you following me so far?”

Richter nodded again, starting to feel uneasy about story time.

“Well, now that I have found this old Hearth Tree, it makes sense that a skeeling might have made its home underneath.”

“Okayyy. So you want to drive it out from underneath the tree?”

“Yes. As I said, it would only take a mixture of red vine and iron leaf. We toss it down the hole and the skeeling is so angry it comes to the surface. Then we can kill it and look for the Seed Core.”

“Sion,” Richter said quietly, “does red vine and iron leaf make a greyish red paste when you mix them?”

“It does,” the sprite said in an innocent voice.

“Would you want to avoid getting it on your skin?”

“Oh yes, it causes horrible itching,” the sprite replied, “That’s why it’s best to keep it in a container or on something like a bark plate.

“Hmmm,” Richter said. “And if you were to throw something like that mixture down a hole, how long would it take for the skeeling to react.”

“Hmmm,” Sion replied. “That’s actually a fascinating topic. Now that you ask, it would depend on time of day. Skeelings are nocturnal. If it were to be exposed to red vine and iron leaf at night it

would go into an immediate rage. If, however, it were to smell the mixture during the daytime,"

"Like now you mean," Richter interjected.

"Yes, Richter, like now. Well in that case, it might take a few minutes to wake it up, but I can promise you it would be EXTRA furious when it did."

"So it might take, almost exactly the amount of time it took you to relate all of this information."

"About that amount of time, yes Richter," Sion replied.

Losing patience Richter asked, "Okay, so what do we do after it comes up?"

"Well," Sion replied with an evil grin, "depending on your perspective, this is the easiest part. Just run and I'll kill it before it eats you."

The ground in front of the tree exploded upward, and a shrill screech filled the air.

The skeeling was NOT the size of a badger. The thing was the size of a black bear! It had an armored carapace like an armadillo. The four legs of the creature ended in three fingered paws. Each

finger was tipped with a wicked black talon, arched slightly inward towards the palm. It was off white in color and its face resembled a rodent of some kind. The eyelids were closed, and two large triangular ears stuck straight up from its head. The snout was rat like, but when it threw back its head and shrieked, the teeth were flat, but tapered to be sharp at the bottom.

“Run,” Sion shouted. The sprite had begun imbuing an arrow as soon as the creature appeared. He struck it in the side, and the arrow impacted with its customary boom. The skeeling fell, knocking over a small tree, but got back up quickly. The arrow hadn’t pierced its hide!

“Well this might be a problem,” the sprite called.

As the skeeling began running towards them, attracted by the sound of their voices, Richter looked over, “You think??”

“Move!”

The sprite jumped up into the tree he had been standing underneath. Richter didn’t waste time firing an arrow, but cast Haste on himself instead. The he enacted the second phase of his master plan. He ran his butt off.

Haste let him keep ahead of the monster that was clearly attracted to his footsteps. Not by very much however. Sion rained down shots on the creature which slowed it down, but did little damage against its armored hide. As Richter ran for his life, he realized his current situation was probably due to poor communication. He was all for taking initiative, and pursing one's own personal bliss, but Sion could have given him a better heads up. He really needed to have a discussion with the sprite and teach him that communication was the foundation for any true friendship! Then maybe in the future, he could avoid narrowly being eaten by a horrible albino rat monster! Of course, maybe all of this was happening because Sion was just a dick, and needed him to act like bait…

"Ahhh, ahhhhhh," Richter screamed. The tip of the skeeling's claws had caught him on the back. Most of the damage was blocked by his armor, but blood freely flowed down from his right shoulder. He put on a burst of extra speed to add some distance between himself and the monster.

The running and dodging had taken them exactly opposite in the small clearing to the tree that Sion was hiding in. The sprite was imbuing his arrow for another strike. Richter began running at the

tree and counted the seconds that he saw the aura. Four, five, six, seven, eight, the blue aura was blinding! The churning of earth and heavy pad falls of the skeeling could be heard getting closer behind Richter. At a distance of only ten yards, Richter dove forward and a split second later Sion released. He landed badly, wrenching his ankle. He turned and drew his short sword. Hopefully he could at least wound the creature and drive it off. He REALLY did not want to be eaten again!

He was worrying for nothing though. The last arrow had connected! Whereas strikes to the beast's body had failed to produce an effect, Sion's overpowered shot to the skeeling's face made it nose dive into the ground and create a furrow ten feet long. It lay motionless for a few moments, and then lifted its head to screech again in rage and defiance. Richter had not wasted time though. He hobbled forward, arm held low and cocked, then rammed his blade into the creature's eye. A faint pop could be felt up his sword arm as he penetrated the eye, followed quickly by the crunch of facial bones and then a meaty resistance as his blade entered grey matter. Without even a death cry, the skeeling's head became dead weight, and Richter withdrew his weapon to the sound of

further grating of bones. He looked up at the sprite's triumphant face, and communicated what was in his heart.

"You're an asshole!"

His companion lightly dropped down, and did not deign to address Richter's assertion. He merely slapped him good naturedly on the back as he walked past to the skeeling's body. He looked up at his friend and said, "Good job! I couldn't have done it without you!" The grin had not left the sprites face.

Richter shook his head, and repeated silently to himself, 'This is what happens when you have poor communication.' He resolved to make more of an effort to engage his friend in the future, specifically about his sick sense of humor. Sion had not stopped looking at the creature, and was walking around it now, marveling at its size. After two complete laps, he looked back and said, "Now let's see what we've got!"

Richter took a healing herb out of his pack and started munching on it. He barely noticed the slightly bitter taste anymore. Honestly it wasn't any worse than some of those fru fru salads that were so popular back on Earth. He walked along behind Sion, and reflected it was strange that he didn't really miss his old life. The action, adventure, danger and reward he had found in the Land resonated

with something inside of him. True, he missed his family and friends. He would also kill for a chicken biscuit! Here though, he felt like he had… purpose. Even running from the skeeling was more satisfying and exciting, than almost that had happened to him back on Earth. This was where he belonged. He had also leveled his Light Armor skill which was nothing to sneeze at.

Sion had reached the tree oblivious to Richter's introspective thoughts. The wood sprite began immediately lowering himself down into the hole. Pushing his musings aside for another time, Richter took his pack off, leaving it at the entrance to the tree and climbed down as well. The space was actually reasonably large, for a subterranean gopher hole that is. A phosphorescent blue moss gave faint illumination. The ceiling was about four and a half feet from the floor, so while he couldn't stand upright, he could move along at a reasonable comfortable crouch. The small area they were in couldn't have been more than forty square feet, but in front of them was another large hole leading downward at a gentle slope. Sion's sword was out, and he moved forward warily.

They dropped down to the second level. It was a larger cavern about twenty yards across and thirty yards deep. There was nothing living, but the floor was littered with hundreds of bones. Many

seemed animal like, but more than a few were the long bones or skulls of humanoids. This thing had been preying on passersby for quite a while. The stench was also a bit overpowering as it had placed it waste wherever it wanted apparently. Richter tried not to think too much about the overly soft earth or the fact that his shoes sank several inches into the ground.

Sion moved to the center of the room. He closed his eyes and held both arms out to his side. He stood like that for over a minute, and then walked with certainty to the back of the cavern. He started digging in the ground with his bare hands, throwing clods of dirt to the side. Sighing, Richter thought, in for a penny in for a pound. He knelt beside his friend and began digging as well. He was sure that the stench was permanently sinking into his skin! After digging for three feet however, a smell began to compete with the offal. The new scent was like clean earth.

A memory came to Richter’s mind. He was standing in the park with an old girlfriend. They had stood under a willow, the branches reaching almost to the ground, and around them a seriously intense rainstorm had let loose its fury. Only a few drops had made their way through the canopy to fall on the two of them, and they had just stood there in silence. It was the last time they had touched. After

that day, the inevitable arguments of youth had broken them apart. Even though it was a bitter sweet memory, Richter had always still cherished it. The faint, clean smell of rain on grass was the somehow the same as what he was experiencing now.

Richter shook his head, clearing his mind. Sion was standing in front of him, holding a brown sphere with light green veins running across the surface. The veins glowed with a gentle light. Sion was smiling, “I don’t know what you were thinking, but I know it was a reassuring memory of nature. That is what the Seed Core truly is. It is the potential for something wonderful. I know I was cavalier earlier, and should have told you what I had planned. I was excited to find an Offshoot, and possibly find a Seed Core. More than that though, I could not let such a wonderful talisman of good be used to feed the power of whatever evil creature had found it. Thank you for helping me, my friend.”

Richter was moved by the sprite’s sincerity. He told him, “I’m here for you man. I will fight beside you, and what is important to you is important to me.” Sion’s smiled in appreciation. “But you’re still an asshole, buddy,” Richter finished. Sion’s smile grew wider, and he gave a small laugh.

“Well now we’re even for the goblin pot! Now touch the Seed Core, and get your reward, my friend,” the sprite said.

With a smile and a confused cock of his head, Richter reached out and laid his hand on brown sphere. The light from the green veins pulsed, and a prompt filled his vision.

Congratulations! You have found a Seed Core. This can be planted to grow almost any type of tree. It will grow into whatever best fits the needs of the region. Will you plant the Core in a safe area?

You have been offered a Quest: Tree of Power I. Plant the Seed Core in a safe area. Reward: Unknown. Yes or No?

Well this was a no brainer. Even if Sion wasn’t cuckoo for this thing, it seemed like a good cause anyway. He selected yes.

Alert! As Master of a Place of Power you have the chance to grow a high level tree if you plant within the boundaries of your domain!

Another exciting opportunity for his village! In addition to the Seed Core there were other items at the back of cavern, many buried just below the surface. They spent the next hour searching and found a multitude of packs and weapons. The faint light from the moss and Seed Core was not enough to truly inspect the items. The stench was also growing unbearable, so they dragged everything

they had found back with them to the surface. The first taste of clean air was a relief!

They set the items they had found to the side and just sat breathing fresh air for a few minutes. A thought intruded on Richter's recovery time. "Will Hisako be okay if I plant the Seed Core at the village? If only one is made every couple hundred years, she might want it back.

Sion shook his head, "The Seed Core was found by us. The Forest obviously wanted it to be part of our destiny. I believe in you Richter. Just use it for good! Now," Sion said, "one last task. Skeeling armor is usually resilient, but that monster was something else. I say we skin it and see if anything useful can be made!"

"Of course, my friend, of course," Richter said with a smile. "But after that, we HAVE to take a bath in the river!"

CHAPTER 18



It took over two weeks to reach the edge of the forest. No other major events occurred after they found the Seed Core, and they were able to enjoy the peace of the forest. Many of the items they had found in the skeeling's lair were rubbish. Old moldy clothes and rusty tools. There were several pouches adding up to a few gold coins. One item did stand out though.

You have received: High steel long sword. Damage 18-24. Durability 37/50. Item class: Uncommon. Quality: Superb. Weight 2.8 kg

Well, it wasn't a magical sword of griffin reaping or anything spectacular, but it was a definite step up from his short sword, which

was looking rather battered anyway.

Leaving the trees was a bit of a shock to the senses. After weeks of shade, and the myriad sounds of the small creatures around them, they were confronted with cultivated land. It was strange to see the wide open sky after so much time in the forest. Before them was an ocean of green grass on gently sloping hills. The sky was cloudless, and was a smooth azure like cornflowers in spring. A broad dirt road was several hundred yards from the edge of the forest. The travelers upon it raised a cloud of dust ten feet in the air. There was some traffic in both directions on it, but the majority was moving south towards a town seen in the distance. Sion and Richter approached the road, and a quick round of questioning informed that the road to Law passed through the town. They joined the flow of traffic towards the settlement.

After only a few minutes, the dirt in the air found its way into their mouths. Can’t even get away from pollution in medieval times, Richter thought with irritation. The time spent traveling on the road was unpleasant to saw the least. Before too long though, the town loomed in front of them. A stone wall surrounded it, fifteen feet high, with towers at each corner. The town gates were wide open though,

and two bored looking guards merely waved traffic through. Until Richter and Sion that is.

“Papers,” the older guard said without changing his demeanor, his hand outstretched.

Richter stared at him without speaking.

Letting out a long suffering sigh, the guard repeated himself, “Pay-perrs.”

Richter put on a fake smile, “I’m sorry, but I didn’t know we needed papers. I didn’t see anyone in front of us hand you anything.”

“YOU don’t need anything, but the Spit there does,” the younger guard said in an aggressive tone. Sion breathed heavily in irritation.

“Stay easy Jonsey, no need to get agitated,” the other guard said. “Now where did you folks come from?”

“We just finished traveling through the forest.”

“Came from Rione did you?”

Richter thought quickly, and remembered that Rione was a neighboring kingdom on the other side of the Serrated Mountains. If his recall was correct from the game, the Kingdom of Rione was less developed, and had large populations of nonhumans.

“Er yeah, we crossed though a pass in the mountains and then traveled down through the forest. Your town is the first that we have seen.”

“Failure to declare at the borders is an offense and requires you to be detained!” Jonsey’s voice was full of righteous indignation, but it was clear that the main source of his ire was Sion. His glare never left the small humanoid.

“Whoa, whoa, Jonsey! I told you to be calm!” A note of iron had worked its way into the older guard’s voice. Turning to Richter he said, “Now you seem like a good sort. I’m sure you didn’t mean to flout the King’s laws now did you?”

The answer obvious, so as sincerely as possible Richter answered, “No, of course not!”

“Now I have a cousin that works at the border, and if you wanted to leave the passage fee with me I’m sure I could get it to him. No harm, no foul.” As the guard said it, he looked Richter meaningfully in the eye.

“That sounds like a wonderful idea,” Richter replied. “Of course, I would feel better if I could offer a bit of coin to pay for the cost of the journey.”

The guard smiled brightly, “Well if it makes you feel better, who am I to object.”

Not knowing what amount was appropriate he took three silver from his purse and paused a moment. The expectant look on the guards face made him dig a bit deeper, and he pulled out five more. At a pleased nod from the guard, Richter closed his purse and handed over the coins. For an older man, the guard made the coins disappear fast enough, and waved the two companions through. As they passed he handed them a piece of paper he had scribbled on. “Take this to the ministry office and get a bond for your friend there,” nodding at Sion. “You will continue to run into trouble without the right papers. Just keep straight on the main street until you see a large white building with a green slate roof on the right.”

Nodding thanks Richter took the paper and began to turn away, but on impulse moved back to the gate. At the guard’s curious glance, he took another five silver out of his purse and said, “It is clear that we are new here, and I would appreciate any help navigating your town and country. I would be very appreciative,” shaking the money in his partially closed fist, the coins making a slight tinkling sound.

“Well I have always fancied myself an ambassador,” the guard chuckled taking the coins and making them disappear just as quickly as the first eight. “When you get to the ministry ask for Edwin. Tell him Caulder sent you. It might also be a good idea to tell them you lost the papers, rather than that you didn’t declare your friend upon entering our fair land. Just a piece of friendly advice, ey? And if you need a place to stay I would recommend the Whistling Hen. They may not be the cheapest, but for a copper the stable boy will place close attention to your horses. Make sure they don’t wander off in the night if you catch my meaning,” he said with a wink. “They also don’t mind if you have friends from various places,” nodding at Sion again.

“Thank you for help, my name is Richter,” he said extending his hand.

Caulder extended his own and they clasped wrists. The guard’s hand was rough with calluses. “You might want to find some clothes as well,” indicating the green armor they both wore, “You kind of stand out. Maybe I’ll see you in the common room later, and we can share an ale. The Whistling Hen has great service,” he said with a laugh, “and either way, welcome to the Leaf’s Crossing!”

Somewhat confused, but happy for the advice, Richter simply nodded and smiled. Even though it costs some money it seemed his

increased Charisma was already coming in handy. With a slight pull on the bridle, his pony started walking again, Sion and his own pony moving along beside him. Throughout the exchange, the younger guard stared coldly at the sprite.

After they had moved up the road for a few minutes, Richter asked, “Why did he call you that?”

Sion took a moment before answering, “I had always heard stories that some humans fostered a hate for us and other races, but I had hoped it wasn’t true. What he called me was an insult. I have never heard about needing to register before though. From the stories I heard, the city of Law has many races within it.”

Richter felt somewhat disheartened. He had hoped that blind hatred wouldn’t follow him to this world. It seemed some things were universal, however. They walked for a while until they came upon a white building with a green roof, just as Caulder had said. A coat of arms, blue swords pointing downward on a field of green, was hung at the top of the building, the same image Richter had seen on the guards’ shirts.

A copper coin each to the valet ensured that their mounts would be watched while they were inside. The entrance led into a large room with multiple hallways leading off of it. People moved quickly in

all directions. Lines of various colors were on the floor, some tracing into open doorways and others leading off into the distance. Seeing that all of the lines converged at the desk at the far end of the room, he joined the que of people waiting. First racial prejudice and now the DMV! So far Richter wasn't a fan of the Kingdom!

After an hour of standing in line, they reached the front. A severe older woman looked down at them from an elevated platform. A large wooden desk was between them. Her hair was in a gray bun, and her mouth seemed set into a perpetual frown. She sneered slightly when she spoke to them.

"Yes," she said in a scratchy voice that would put a pack a day smoker to shame.

Richter plastered a smile onto his face, "Hello, ma'am, I was told by the city guard that I needed to get papers for my companion," nodding to Sion.

Apparently his increased Charisma was powerless in the face of entrenched bureaucracy. Pinning Richter to the floor with her gaze, the woman said "Failure to declare a nonhuman upon entering Yves is a serious offense!"

“No no,” Richter said quickly. “We simply lost our papers. I have this note.” He handed her the paper that Caulder had given him.

With disdain, the woman took the paper and scanned it. Flicking her gaze back and forth between Richter and Sion, she grunted. With one last long look, as if to question why the world had to have such imbeciles in it, she took out a piece of paper from a stack on her left and jotted down a quick set of notes. “Take this to requisition processing and get a note of dividend. Then take the note to accounting, and pay the requisite fee. They will give you an AIY-6 form. Have that signed by middle registry, and return the form back to this desk after obtaining the signatures of three people in good standing within the town. At that point…”

As she rattled off these directions with the sure tone of a general giving commands on the battlefield, Richter began to wail internally! His panic ratcheted up with each new mini quest he was being given. Even Sion who had faced a horde of goblins and an undead sorcerer, seemed to have paled under her onslaught. With the feeling of a man without air, Richter made one last effort to keep from being drowned in a week of bureaucracy, “I need to talk to Edwin,” Richter blurted.

“Ohhh,” she said slowly, dragging the single syllable out and staring at him. Richter was fairly certain she was doing her best to make him catch fire with her mind! After a seeming eternity she said, “Follow the blue and white dashed line to the second floor.” The woman’s voice was like two rocks scrapping together… coarse rocks.

Saying thank you, Richter and Sion walked, walked rather quickly, away from the fearsome creature. After only a moment of searching, they found the appropriate line and followed it to the second floor. It led to a door with “Nonhuman Affairs” carved above it. It might have taken days to get here if he had followed the proper channels! Richter realized that the money he had given to Caulder was probably the best money he had ever spent in either world. Whether the interaction was due to his Charisma or Luck he’d never know, but he was thankful! Knocking on the door, they swiftly heard something crash against the other side of it and a shouted, “Go Away!” Richter hoped he hadn’t spoken too soon.

With the only other option being to go back down stairs and face Edna the Terrible, Richter steeled himself and went inside the room. A portly man sat behind a desk piled with papers. His robe hung open revealing a simple white shirt and brown pants. The shirt had

several stains upon it, and by the fade pattern, they had been accumulated over some time. He looked up from whatever he was working on and snarled, “I said I was busy! Who are you anyway? Do I need to call the guards?” The man opened his mouth, and drew in a sharp breath.

Before he could call for help, and Sion and he ended up in jail, Richter said, “Caulder sent us. He said you could help.”

“Caulder? That no good sunuvabitch! He still owes me from that game of Kings last week! And you thought you would engender sympathy by using his name? Ha! Guar--”

“He sent us to give you the money he owes you,” Sion interrupted loudly.

“He did,” Edwin asked sounding confused.

“He did,” Richter echoed, sounding confused himself.

Sion widened his eyes, set his mouth and indicated Edwin with a not so subtle head movement.

Richter looked back at Edwin, whose mouth was still open as if undecided whether to finish his outcry. Taking what seemed like his three hundred and fifty thousandth sigh since coming to The Land, Richter squared his shoulders, and more definitively said, “He did.”

A large grin landed upon the face of the government official, “Well now! That changes everything, my friends! So you have my gold piece with you then?”

Never trusting a smile, Richter narrowed his eyes. Plastering a large smile of his own on, he said, “Of course! It would be great if we could finish here quickly because we need to drop off our bounties.”

“Bounties,” Edwin asked his smile slipping a bit.

“Yes,” Richter said, his own smiling widening. “They are really beginning to stink! Taking only dead on delivery contracts can surely make things easier, but it’s hard on the nose when they start to pile up! You have to bring the whole body back now too! So much easier when they only needed the head. Isn’t that right, Sion?” The sprite stood at back of the room caressing the hilt of his sword. Upon hearing his name he just gave an evil smile that did not reach his eyes. Shaking his head as if to mourn the loss of a simpler time, Richter reached for his purse to pull out the money and said innocently, “You did say three gold pieces?”

During his soliloquy, Edwin’s eyes had widened until it seemed the man’s bushy eyebrows would fly off the top of his head, “Well, well, that is to say, I think I confused Caulder with another fellow…

Kwalder. Yes I remember now, Caulder only owed me 7 silver and 5 copper."

"Hmm, well that would be an easy mistake to make," Richter said with a smile. Counting out the required funds he placed them in Edwin's sweaty palm. "Now we are all friends! We have done you a favor by helping you collect on a debt. What are friends for if not favors though, right? Perhaps you could help us as well. We apparently need papers so that my Companion can travel through the kingdom."

Nodding quickly Edwin moved to get out various papers and stamps. As he started to get their paperwork in order, Richter said "While we are here, maybe you can tell me why we need to have papers at all. It also might be nice to have a reference for someone in government over in Law. We like making friends. I'm a people person, right Sion?" A grim chuckle was his only answer.

With another look at the seemingly blood thirsty sprite with his ever so sharp sword, Edwin started to nod even faster as continued his task.

A short while later, the two friends were walking down the street and laughing. They found directions to the Whistling Hen easily enough. For the some reason the man who gave him directions

winked like Caulder had. Still not getting the joke, he and Sion just thanked him and strolled to the inn. A red hen was on the sign with its beaked pursed and musical notes coming out.

As they walked inside they were greeted with a wave of sound. Time had been moving on, and the interior of the inn was swollen with customers for dinner. A musician played some kind of stringed instrument, and several patrons clapped along. A large black pot hung over a fire and a hearty aroma of vegetables and simmering meat permeated the air. There was definitely a stale beer smell in the air as well, but it was a lot better than some bars Richter had been in. It seemed like everyone was having a good time.

More interesting, there was a mix of races in the inn. Though it was mostly humans by far, there was a table of dwarves near the center of the room. He couldn’t be sure of course having never seen one before, but the short frame, large muscles and beards seemed like a clear giveaway. At another table there was a taller woman with slightly pointed ears laughing at the joke of one of her human table companions. This was the world he had dreamed of. A world of fantasy melded with a world of hope and joy. And that feeling of contentment lasted right up to the moment that Sion drew an arrow with a snarl and pointed it across the room.

The mood changed as first one, then another, and then all of the people in the room stood and drew whatever weapons they had available. A few only managed to fall on their face, clearly deep in their cups. Richter had his hand on his sword confused as he did not see any danger. He traced the line of the Sion's arrow and final saw the target of his friend's anger. A brown tunic covered a goblin the size of a scout. It ('He' Richter mentally corrected remembering Hisako's advice) was squealing in terror as it pressed its back against the bar, seeking escape.

"Lower that bow!" a voice shouted. A large woman came from behind the bar holding a rolling pin. "If that arrow leaves your bow, we will rip you apart!" She put herself in the path of Sion's shot.

"Sion, put up your bow," Richter said. "We are guests here! Do not let your hate guide you! Is this what the Hearth Mother would want?"

Sion glanced at him sharply, then relieved tension on his bow string. He shoved his arrow back into his quiver in a smooth motion.

"Now get out," the woman spat.

Richter raised his hands in appeasement. "I am so sorry that we have disrupted the love and peace of this place. What you have here

is amazing. My Companion and I have had a hard time. We have fought through many dangers, and barely survived against a band of goblins that were trying to corrupt his home."

"That is no excuse!"

"No it is not miss. I won't give you an excuse. My dad used to say, excuses are monuments of nothing that build bridges to nowhere. I'm just a man who wants to offer an apology." Richter reached under his armor for a hidden pouch. Opening it, he fished inside and then withdrew an opal. Moving slowly, he made his way through the sea of hostile faces, and past the woman who protected the small creature. He knelt, as the goblin shivered in front of him. Waiting until it looked him in the eye, he simply said, "I'm sorry," and handed the jewel to the goblin. Its shivers came under control, and it looked from the gem to him, first in fear, then in confusion and wonder.

Standing, Richter looked at the woman again and met her eyes. He nodded once, and then shouldered his pack and turned to leave. Sion fell in step behind him.

"Wait," the woman called. "Why are you here?"

Richter turned back, "I met a man named Caulder who said that this was a place we could come and be welcome. I know how ironic

that sounds now.”

The woman held his gaze, “Do you promise to not commit any violence while you are under this roof?”

Richter opened his mouth to speak, but she said sharply, “I do not need to hear it from you!”

Sion stepped forward and said, “I reacted, I did not think. I brought dishonor to my Hearth, not honor. My name is Sion of the Wood Sprites of the Forest of Nadria. I swear I will commit no violence if none is committed against me. Kva ti relada voe.”

Preparing to translate, Richter was surprised when the woman responded, “Ti voe reladii.”

Sion had said, ‘my life for my word’ and she had accepted his pledge, ‘your word for your life.’

The woman looked around and addressed all the patrons. They were still on their feet unsure about the turn of events. “Well ladies and gentlemen, I hope you have enjoyed your mid dinner entertainment!” A series of chuckles came from all around. “Let’s start the music back! Next round is on the house!”

“And the round after that is on me,” Richter said. More cheers followed his pronouncement.

A grudging smile formed on the woman's face. "Well you sure make an entrance. Call me Rosy, everybody does." She extended her hand, but when Richter went to shake it, she moved forward a half step and clasped his wrist. Her grip was surprisingly strong. With a firm shake she released. "Now what can I do for you?"

"We need a place to stay, and I need to sell the goods that we have."

"So you're merchants? Never really seen merchants wearing woodland armor before."

"Not exactly," Richter said with a small laugh. "What are really need are supplies for my village, and people brave enough to be pioneers."

"What type of people are you looking for?"

"I need the kind of people that can make a community. Carpenters, farmers, masons, guards, blacksmiths, etc. I have a village rich with resources, but need people to help me realize its potential."

"Hmmm, well you can sell your items here, though if any are magical you'll get a much better price in the capital. As far as the

people that you are looking for, I’m sure you’ve seen that nonhumans are treated as inferiors in Yves.”

“Yeah, we just spent time in the ministry getting papers for Sion. That’s actually how we met Caulder. He guided us to the appropriate person.”

“Well I don’t know if they explained it, but these rules are new. In the past, the Kingdom had always welcomed the different races. Each worked together for the betterment of all. When he died though, his son listened to conservative advisors. He started to enact laws that slowly funneled power and wealth away from Yves’s nonhuman citizens. The rumor is that it found its way into the pockets of the king and his friends. Ten years later, all nonhumans are either bound to one place or bonded to a human. That’s the significance of those papers you received at the ministry today. Now, you are basically the sprite’s guardian. Anything he does you are responsible for. He is ‘bonded’ to you.”

“What is the bound option?”

“Basically like a work permit. Nonhumans get hired under a human to work, but end up getting paid coppers on the gold. They also cannot move far from their job or they get thrown in jail. Hence,

‘bound.’ You wouldn’t believe it, but thirty years ago all races roamed the kingdom openly, sharing their ideas and culture.”

Richter looked around the room, “It seems like you guys are doing pretty good.”

“But this is one of the only places in town where the different races mix openly. With the new laws, old hates have risen up. More and more humans are coming to despise anyone different from themselves.” Thinking of the younger gate guard, Richter knew he had already experienced this change in opinion.

“Well, you have told me what started your travels, but what can I do for you now,” she asked.

“We could use a place to stay for the night, and maybe an introduction or two if you can manage it.”

“Done,” she said with another smile. “Each room costs three coppers, but it has two beds and comes with dinner. Looks like Rat has made a good stew tonight. I trust you won’t try and kill our cook again?”

“The goblin is your cook,” Sion asked in disbelief.

“Yes, and he’s a good one. He makes the best stew in town. I think it’s on account of the goblin’s sense of smell. I’m sure we won’t

have any more trouble with you?”

“I have agreed to heed the peace and I will. If you say the food is good, then I will trust you. But is his name truly Rat?”

“Yes,” she said with a smile.

“How did he get that name,” the sprite asked.

“You don’t want to know,” she said with the same smile. “Do you have any animals that need caring for?” At Richter’s nod she continued, “Well it’s another copper per animal. So are you interested?”

“I am.” Richter liked her straight forward manner, despite their rocky start.

“Well then,” she said slapping her thighs. “Let me get you the key to your room. The stable boy will see to your mounts. The soup is almost done. Why don’t you put your things down, and then go buy some clothes. I don’t know if anyone has told you, but you look kinda odd walking around in green armor.”

Taking the hint, he and Sion followed directions. After dropping their things in their rooms, they headed outside. Rosy gave them directions to a nearby clothes shop that catered to multiple races. They were soon both outfitted with serviceable traveling clothes.

Richter wore black pants and a beige shirt, both of which fit over his armor. Sion decided to maintain his color scheme, and wore a green tunic that fell over darker green pants. Now properly attired, they made their way back to the inn.

“Hello my friends,” a shout greeted them when they reentered the common room. Caulder sat near the stage where the musicians were performing. He waved them over to the table. When they sat, he raised his mug and drained it in one go. Not missing a beat, he half stood and raised his other hand over his head with three fingers extended, “Rosy my love! Three ales for three hard working men!” Rosy favored him with a faint smile, and a roll of her eyes.

Sitting back down, Caulder looked at them with a smile, “So was Edwin able to help?”

“Yes, we have the papers for Sion, and we were able to help Edwin with that debt you owed him,” Richter said wryly.

“Yes well, sounds like everybody got what they wanted. You got your papers, Edwin got his coins, and I got the warm feeling of helping someone in need! Haha!”

Laughing at the guard’s roguish wit, Richter couldn’t summon any irritation. The ales were delivered. The three men listened to the

music, and drank the slightly bitter brew. After a time, three soups were brought to the table, and even Sion admitted it was a savory fare. They sat in quiet comradery as the hours whiled away. Patrons slowly trickled out until only guests and die hard drinkers were left. Rosy came to join them as the hustle and bustle of the inn calmed down. “So what’s your next step from here?”

As Richter had listened to the conversations at nearby tables, many of them had centered on the nonhumans’ discontent with the current course of the kingdom, and dissatisfaction with their treatment as second class citizens. “I feel like there may be many nonhumans who have the skills I need, and aren’t quite happy with the life they’re leading here. I know there are not enough people here in this town who can help me, but there just might be in the capital city. Do you know anyone that you could introduce me to?”

Rosy’s smile spoke for itself. As the conversation went on Caulder got up and whispered in the ear of one of the prettier barmaids. After placing a few coppers in her hand, she smiled and they slipped up the stairs to the sound of giggling. Richter furrowed his brow and looked at Rosy. She gave a hearty laugh, “This is the Whistling Hen. For the right price, my girls will put their lips together

and whistle you a tune. And you get to pick exactly where they're whistling!"

Well, Richter thought smile, this world certainly does has a lot to offer!

CHAPTER 19



The next day they sold the weapons and animal skins they had brought with them. The trader could not buy the ice staff, saying it was worth more than he had. He recommended that they take the staff to either a high quality weapons dealer or a mage guild. What they sold only amounted to one gold coin and a handful of silver, but every little bit helped. Richter quickly discovered the conversion ratio of the coins was the same as the game, 10 copper made one silver and 10 silver made one gold. An average laborer made between 4-5 silver coins every two weeks, or fortnight as they called it. It apparently was just enough to live on. Just like back home there was a well-defined and large rich poor gap. Being a feudal society made

it exponentially worse. Rosy told them that nobles and royalty controlled most of the wealth and land. Merchants and skilled craftsmen fell somewhere in the middle. The good news was that the amount of money he had found made him pretty rich indeed!

The town saw a large amount of traffic being midway between the capital and Rione. As such it was quite easy to buy and sell mounts. They no longer had a large amount of goods to transport, so they decided to sell the ponies. They would make the rest of the way on foot. With the loss of their pack animals they actually made better speed. They used their Haste spells as often as possible, limited only by their mana regeneration. Richter allocated his 50% increase to his Air Magic, not wanting to risk his percentage points being randomly assigned. That plus their frequent practicing allowed him to gain level three.

Congratulations! You have reached level 3 in Air Magic. Increasing level allows you to cast stronger spells.

His relentless mana usage gave an added benefit. He was awarded +1 to his Intelligence and +2 to Wisdom from his frequent mana usage.

A week later, they arrived before the walls of Law, Yves's capital city. They had passed several smaller towns over the past week,

making the trip easy and comfortable. The distance they covered must have been farther than the entirety of their journey before, but the well-traveled road made it much easier to travel. While Leaf's Crossing had strong walls and some towers built in for defense, Law seemed unassailable. One hundred foot high walls were topped with crenellated battlements. The city rose up behind the wall, clearly built upon a large hill. It was hard to tell, but it looked like it was roughly build in concentric circles with the palace on top of the hill. A wide moat surrounded the city walls. The river ran behind the city, and they had dug the moat to be filled with river water. A large flow of traffic moved over the drawbridge and into the city. The guards here were in polished chain mail with halberds held upright. They also had the crest of blue swords on a green background emblazoned on their chests. The high volume of people and animals moving into the city made stopping everyone for questions unreasonable, but the hawk eyed gaze of the guards promised swift action in response to any threat.

As they move past the initial gate and under the walls, Richter was taken aback by its thirty foot thickness. Murder holes and arrow slits could be seen in the ceiling and walls. Exiting the tunnel, there were more guards standing at attention. Most of the crowd were

humans. The few nonhumans that were present kept their heads down as if afraid of bringing attention to themselves. The main street of the city was a wide throughway, but dozens of avenues meandered off to either side. Richter and Sion went further into the city, and the elevation gradually rose. Their travel was only interrupted once when they passed a patrol of guards. They asked for Sion's papers, but after only a cursory inspection they waved the two Companions on. The quality of the houses and shops rose as well the higher they went. After walking for half an hour they took a medium sized street to the left. The lane curved inward slightly following the natural curve of the hill. They slowly circled the city looking for the inn Rosy had recommended. After being lost several times, and receiving direction from the locals an equal number of times, they arrived at the Laughing Imp.

The Laughing Imp was a good deal more boisterous that the Whistling Hen. Several patrons were slumped over the bar in varying states of intoxication. The smell of the bar was certainly not as clean as the inn that they had come from, but the laughter and joy in the room had the same intensity. Sion and Richter walked to the bar and waited for a moment until a smiling barmaid came up. Bounced up would have been a better description based on her ample chest.

“What can I get you my dears?”

For a moment Richter stared at her as she breathed heavily, a smile on her lips. When Sion nudged him he realized it had gotten creepy. “Yes! I need to talk to Terrod. Rosy from the Whistling Hen in Leaf’s Crossing sent me.”

Still smiling, she asked them to wait and moved off. She spoke to a man behind the bar who seemed to be giving the punchline of a joke based on the guffaws of the people sitting in front of him. She gestured to Richter and Sion, and he handed her an empty mug to fill. He walked over to the two Companions with a broad smile and an extended hand. He was middle aged but not old, and had a brown beard that while a little wild, was not completely unkempt. Richter used Analyze on him. It had become a habit with every person he saw. The skill had not yielded anything further than base information so far, but it was still good practice.

Human: Lvl 6. Health 170. Mana 110. Stamina 160.

The man’s numbers were higher than expected. Most of the random town or city folk Richter had examined were level 3 or below. Not surprising since the only way he had found to gain experience seemed to be battle or fulfilling quests. If not for minor quests that dealt with their skill sets, most city dwellers would probably only be

level 1 no matter how high their individual skills were. The guards he had seen were typically level 10 or above. Caulder had been level 12. When asked about it, the man had explained that he was a former soldier. All soldiers were required to fight the random monsters that occasionally cropped up and/or patrol the boundaries of the kingdom. Apparently it was a constant struggle to defend the borders from hostile creatures or raiders.

Richter reached out his hand and clasped wrists with the barkeep.

“My name is Richter, I was sent by Rosy in Leaf’s Crossing.”

“Shelly told me that. What can I help you with?”

“We are travelers to Esabil.”

Terrod’s smile tightened ever so slightly. “Of course, come with me.” They walked past the bar and into the kitchen. It was a setting of controlled chaos. The typical hustle and bustle of people performing the necessary tasks to keep a kitchen running. Terrod nodded to the various staff, as he walked through to the other side and out into a back alley. Richter and Sion followed him outside, and down into the alley. Terrod turned and looked at them with a serious expression. All of the laughter and joy had gone from his face.

“You need to tell me who you are, right now. And if I don’t like your answers, this filth ridden alley will be the last thing you see.” As he had been talking, three of the larger kitchen workers had filed out into the alley holding knives or cudgels. Worse, the direction Richter and Sion had been walking in ended in a blank wall and a pile of rubbish. The three men stood between them and the exit from the alley.

Sion drew his sword causing the toughs to take a threatening step forward. Knowing only seconds remained before the ground of the alley was covered with blood, quite possibly theirs, Richter held out his arms with palms up.

“There is no need for this. We were sent by Rosy, the owner of the Whistling Hen in Leaf’s Crossing. She told me to come here and say that phrase to you. I have a village. I need specialized labor to build it into something worthwhile. She told me that many nonhumans are unhappy with the new laws, and are not being treated fairly. I can offer them another option. After she heard me out she said you might know about some people that would be interested.”

Terrod stared at them. “What you’re saying is something anyone would know just by simple gossip. Everyone knows the Laughing

Imp welcomes non humans. Someone might use that knowledge to try and find malcontents. How do I know you're not just trying to trick us and then throw us into the King's dungeons?"

Richter was more than a little annoyed at the treatment he and Sion were getting, "Listen! I'm here to offer a chance for an honest life to those that deserve it. We gave you the code word! Esabil! If you don't want to help that's fine, we will figure out another way. But if you move any closer to me and my friend, it's very likely that this alley will be the last thing that YOU see," Richter warned.

The three men behind them tensed getting ready for a fight. Richter drew his sword. It was a shame that their bows were unstrung. If Sion could shoot, the outcome of this fight wouldn't even be a question! Hopefully their armor and superior weapons would win the day. Richter had switched his respawn to the Mist Village, but the option had not come up again since they started their journey. If he died, it would take several weeks to get back here, and he would lose all of his possessions. He just hoped Sion would be able to escape.

"Stop!" Terrod through up his hand. "I do not want violence, but I will not let a snake into my house. Can you prove what you are

saying? Did she offer you anything that would make me believe you?”

Richter glared at him blade in hand, “She said you were trustworthy, but that you’re also a suspicious bastard and cheat when you play cards.”

A smile twitched on Terrod’s face, “Well that does sound like Rosy. Okay! You have bought yourself a good meal and a place to stay. We will talk again in the morning.” He waved off the three men, and strolled past Richter and Sion as if nothing had happened. “We have lamb tonight, how do you like your ribs?” With that one liner worthy of an 80s action flick, he walked inside still with that wry smile on his face.

Richter and Sion looked at each other and after a moment, both sheathed their swords.

“So do we go back in,” Sion asked.

“It definitely wasn’t the reception I was expecting. They didn’t try to rob us though, they just acted like they had someone to protect,” Richter said pondering their options. “So we have two options. We can go back in and see what comes of it or take our chances somewhere in the city.”

“Well, I have never had lamb before,” Sion said, “but it did smell good.”

They went back into the kitchen, and walked through to the common room. The people there were laughing and enjoying their food with no idea of the violence and death that had almost occurred only a dozen yards away. It was a good lesson Richter thought, even though they had left the woods, there was still plenty of danger in the city.

The cute barmaid met them as they left the kitchen, and led them back to a table. She quickly brought two square wooden plates, topped with meat, green vegetables and chunks of bread still steaming from the oven. They both asked her for an ale, and then tucked into the meal. Whatever else could be said of their reception at the Laughing Imp, the food was wonderful. Both sat in silence devoted to their meal, and when seconds were offered they both gladly accepted. Richter looked at his small friend polishing off his second plate, and wondered where it all went.

An hour after they sat down, Terrod came by the table and dropped off their room key. He only paused long enough to tell them their room was on the third floor, second door on the left. Then he disappeared back into kitchen. They sat there a while longer before

deciding to call it a night. Their room here was much the same as their room in the Whistling Hen, maybe a touch bigger and the mattresses slightly smellier. Richter and Sion looked at each other and with silent understanding moved one bed against the door, and the other against it. Feeling safer they both laid down for the night but kept their weapons close to hand.

They woke the next morning to a rapping on the door. “Terrod would like to see you downstairs,” a feminine voice called out, and then footsteps could be heard walking away from the door and moving downstairs. They both shouldered their packs, and moved the beds away from the door to walk downstairs.

The common room smelled surprisingly fresh. The windows had been opened up and a light rain was falling outside. From the scent in the air, someone had either burned incense or thrown sweet grass on the fire which still had smoldering embers from last night. And there was Terrod, sitting at a table and drinking tea. When he saw them he waved them over, gesturing that they should join him. As they sat down he poured more tea from the pot into two ready cups.

“Well then,” Terrod said after they had joined him. “First I want to apologize about last night. I had a few friends ask around and we found a courier who remembered seeing you entering Leaf’s

Crossing at the time you say. Luckily, a man and a sprite are an uncommon enough sight to merit recall. He remembered you talking to a local guard, and it seemed like you were being shook down."

"The guard's name was Caulder. He actually was not a bad guy in the end, and he's the reason we ended up at the Whistling Hen at all."

"Well, sorry again," Terrod said. "The situation in Law is worse than Rosy probably knows. The regulations have grown stricter. Because of that, some nonhumans have started to leave. For a while, that wasn't a problem. The King didn't concern himself with the odd nonhuman that wanted to go elsewhere. When the skilled craftsmen started to leave however, the humans who had been profiting from their labor started to complain. I don't know if Rosy explained, but all actual business must be conducted through humans. The human, or representative as they are called, is often allocated by the government. These have become coveted positions. It is basically a way to make money with little effort. The representatives shave off as much money as that they want. So when that income was threatened by the nonhumans leaving, the representatives complained. Their government cronies passed another law making it illegal to even leave the kingdom without

permission. Anyone caught in the attempt is either released with all of their property confiscated, imprisoned or put back to work with their loved ones ‘detained’ to ensure their cooperation.”

“That’s horrible,” Richter said sincerely, “I had no idea things were that bad here.”

“I am a known opponent of the new laws. I hope you can now understand my skepticism and caution when someone walks up to me out of the blue asking about such a sensitive topic.”

Richter nodded, not willing to completely forget the scene last night, but the explanation made Terrod’s actions understandable if not immediately forgivable.

“The courier confirming your story was a point for you. So I appreciate you accepting my apology. But despite the fact that you seem like a likeable guy, if you want my help and trust, you need to answer some questions and prove yourself. Now where is this village you need help with?”

“It’s in the Forest of Nadria, I’m not willing to give any specific directions for security reasons.”

“The forest isn’t a safe place. No offense to you,” Terrod said looking at Sion, “but even your people have been known to claim

lives if your territory is infringed upon. And the Wood Sprites are about the most benevolent force that I know of in that region."

Richter gave a small laugh, "That's actually how we met, me almost getting shot full of sprite arrows. The Wood Sprites and I now have a good relationship. I won't promise absolute safety. I don't think that exists in any world, but those who choose to come will be able to be part of something potentially wonderful, and the defenses of my village are strong."

"Hmmm, I don't like the lack of information, but that brings us to the main point, trust. I don't put much faith in words, actions though, that is something I can believe in," Terrod said, trailing off making it clear that there was more to be said.

Sion leaned in, "Just tell us what you want us to do. What is going to gain us you ever so valuable 'trust'?"

Terrod put a large smile on his face, "Why all I want you to do is to help you help yourselves!"

CHAPTER 20



Apparently Terrod and other sympathetic humans had started to ferry nonhumans out of the city. They had to reach out to various groups to accomplish this, however. One of them was a local thief group called the Night Blades. The plan was for the nonhumans to make it to the sewers under the city and the Night Blades would help them out of the city from there. Apparently the first half had gone smoothly, but the Night Blades sent a message to Terrod's compatriots that five coppers per head would have to be paid or they would send the nonhumans to the King's guard. A silver coin was apparently the standard bounty for runaways. The Blades had said they were giving Terrod and his colleagues a bargain.

“We know where our people are being held. There are many people who disagree with the King’s laws. They help how they can, but not many are fighters. I have five good men that can hold their own and seven more who are willing to fight. Basically what I’m saying is we need a bit more muscle. If you help us, I will spread your request to the nonhumans. I will also help you get anyone that wants to leave out of the city. Will you fight?”

You have been offered a Quest: Fight for those Who Cannot I. A group of nonhumans is being held for ransom. Terrod will help you, but only if you help him first. He needs your aid to free the captured nonhumans from the thieves. Reward: Increased reputation with nonhumans of Yves. Possible colonists to come live in the Mist Village. Yes or No?

Richter looked at Sion who gave him a nod. Looking back at Terrod he asked, “What’s the plan?”

“I need to get some things together, rally the troops as it were. Is there anything else you need to do in the city?”

“I need to sell some gems. I also have a magic staff to sell.”

“I know two reliable merchants. Is there anything else?”

“This might be a long shot, but do you know anyone that can teach me magic spells?”

“Mage guilds are sometimes willing to sell lesser spells, but rarely anything stronger.”

“We are new to our magic, higher level spells are most likely beyond us anyway.”

“Go to Aldimah’s Focus. It’s where I was going to send you to sell that staff anyway. Walk uphill past two rows of buildings and then go left. Circle a quarter of the city, and you’ll see a string of shops. Aldimah’s has purple windows and a blue door. I only ask that you return by five bells after midday.”

Richter and Sion assured him that they would, and then they left. They decided to see the merchant first, in case they needed more coin to buy whatever spells were available. His shop was only a short walk from the inn. Walking in, they were greeted with a practiced smile. “Gentlemen! Please come in! Whatever you are looking for I’m sure I can help you find, and if not, I’m sure I can provide something even better, hazaah!”

The merchant wore a white turban with a colorful feather coming from the front. He was older, and couldn’t have been an inch or two

over five feet. He carried more than a little weight around his middle. His clothes were loose silk, and he had a red sash tied around his waist.

Amused by the round merchant's demeanor, Richter smiled and said, "Terrod sent us. He said that you could be trusted to treat us fairly."

The merchant's eyes grew somewhat large in alarm. "Yes of course! Please tell Master Terrod that as always, Hafiz is a humble servant and is happy to help. Any friends of his are already friends of mine!"

Richter was somewhat surprised by the reaction. Just what kind of rep did the innkeeper have? Richter decided that since an honest merchant was most likely as rare and precious a sight as a comet, he would not question his good fortune.

"I am actually here to sell some jewels. They were, err, part of an inheritance." Richter pulled out the small chest from the Mist Village vault and opened it.

"Sir! Please be careful. That much wealth would be worth all of our lives!" The portly man came from behind the counter, and rushed past them to the door. He closed and locked it while looking out the

windows to make sure no one had been looking in. Satisfied they had not been observed, the merchant walked back behind the counter, and drew aside a curtain. Hafiz motioned for Richter and Sion to follow him.

“You seem to be showing us a great deal of trust,” Richter said.

“Well you have been sent by Terrod which means a great deal. You also seem like a good sort overall. Finally you walked in with a chest of jewels that is most likely worth more than my shop. Not many thieves try to rob you with a golden blade encrusted with diamonds.”

Richter smiled, “Those are some good points. Either way, thank you for your trust, and I promise you that it’s not misplaced.”

Hafiz walked over to a small table with a stool. Several large lamps made the room well-lit despite the lack of windows. “Please place the chest on the table, good sir.”

Richter laid the chest on the table, and Hafiz began removing the gems one by one. He held each to his eye, looking through a small eye piece that had a soft orange glow coming from it. He examined each, and made notations on a small piece of paper. “This will take a while sir. Please feel free to peruse my goods while you wait. There

are many different goods up front, but my elite stock is on these back shelves. I invite your companion to stay with me. Always best to keep each other honest, hazaah!”

Smiling again at the strange little man, Richter went back to the front of the shop. Sion decided to stay with the merchant as suggested. Richter walked through the front and found several useful items, rope, flint and steel, oil, and other sundry items. He gathered them on the counter and then moved to the back again to see the merchant’s “elite” items.

The lowest shelves held gems and jewelry. Since he had come to sell jewels, those shelves did not keep his interest. What he found above was much more interesting, however. The first thing his eyes were drawn to was a glass display filled with arrow heads. They all had a slight glow to them.

You have found: Arrowhead of Dispelling. Will dispel active enchantments on target.

You have found: Arrowhead of Flame. Will do additional 10-12 damage on impact. Chance to cause Burn.

You have found: Arrowhead of Stun. Chance to stun target for 3-5 seconds.

You have found: Arrowhead of Negation. Will ignore magical defenses.

You have found: Arrowhead of Poison. Chance to poison target, doing additional 2-4 damage for 10 seconds.

You have found: Arrowhead of Freeze. Will do additional 7-9 damage on impact. Chance to cause Freeze.

You have found: Arrowhead of Piercing. Will ignore up to 33% of opponents armor.

You have found: Arrowhead of Confusion. Target may attack anyone near, including possibly allies.

Jackpot! Richter moved the box of arrowheads to the front counter.

He also found various other items that would come in useful.

You have found: Ring of Health: Durability 11/11. Item class: Uncommon. Quality: Above Average. Weight: 0.1 kg. Traits: Increase maximum Health by +30.

He found four of those.

You have found: Ring of Mana: Durability 9/9. Item class: Uncommon. Quality: Average. Weight: 0.1 kg. Traits: Increase

maximum mana by +20.

You have found: Belt of Strength: Durability 40/40. Item class: Rare. Quality: Above Average. Weight 1.1 kg. Traits: Increase Strength by +4.

The last item that caught his attention was a black satchel sitting at the end of the shelf.

You have found: Bag of Holding. Durability 50/50. Item class: Epic. Quality: Exquisite. Weight 1.0 kg + 0.1 kg x total weight of items. Traits: Can hold large amount of items. Contents of bag will only be 10% of normal weight. Thinking of desired object will retrieve it from bag. Item is Soul Bound, it cannot be lost or stolen. Can only be transferred with an open heart.

At last! What Richter had been missing more than anything else from his game days was the inventory that was present in every RPG. Having to actually schlep everything he wanted to carry was a real pain in the butt. Anyone who has had to walk to the store for groceries would know what he was talking about. He held the bag almost reverently as he placed it on the counter. By the time he was done perusing, Hafiz was putting down his ledger, done cataloguing the stones in the chest.

“Well good sir, you are truly blessed to have found such a rich trove of jewels.”

“Are they really that good?”

“Oh yes! My monocle of identification was made by the finest elvish glass smiths and then enchanted by one of the Master Light mages of the Illuminator guild. I would stake my reputation by this ledger,” then he sighed. “As I suspected I can only afford a portion of these stones.”

The merchant pushed about a fifth of the stones to the side, and they looked mostly to be only the semiprecious stones. “These stones are worth roughly three hundred and ten gold.” Richter coughed, his mouth opening in shock. That was thirty one thousand dollars! He was hoping that the gems would cover his costs, but if Hafiz was correct his chest was more than a hundred grand, maybe closer to two or even three!

Hafiz misunderstood Richter’s expression. “I promise you sir that this is a fair price! I am an honest merchant, and especially would not cheat of friend of Mr. Terrod!” Richter closed his mouth and assured the man that he trusted his good intentions, mollified Hafiz continued, “I have this in gold bands,” and he laid two finger length rectangular bars of gold down on the table along a heavy bag and

ten gold coins. Seeing Richter's questioning look, he explained. "Each of these bars is the equivalent of one hundred gold coins. Now if you allow me, I can see what you have picked from my stock, and we can do the rest in trade."

The rotund man walked up to the counter, making short oohs and aahs he lined up each item and placed a stone next to each. The arrowheads equated to a thumbnail sized jade, the rings a slightly smaller turquoise. The belt of strength, a square cut emerald, and the basic items he piled together and equated to a small pearl. When he came to the bag however, he looked at Richter for a moment and then firmly placed two diamonds in front of it.

Richter coughed in shock. He knew because of the bag's stats, as well as its usefulness, it would be expensive, but good god! Two diamonds that size probably meant he was paying as much for that bag as he had for his first car. Suddenly an argument with an ex-girlfriend came to mind where she criticized him for wasting money on video games, and he threw her expensive purse collection back at her. She had of course responded, "It's an investment." His response that maybe math wasn't her strong suit had NOT gone well. Sigh, live and learn. Maybe if the purse had been able to fold

space to make a pocket dimension, then she would have had a point though.

Even though it was painful he looked Hafiz in the eye and nodded his assent. The man grinned broadly, and clapped his hands. “Praise to the lord of commerce, let us both profit from this day, hazaah!” Shaking hands they finished the deal. Richter was surprised when Hafiz reached out with both hands and laid them on the bag. A white light emanated from his hands, and when he removed them a clear gem sat on the bag. At the merchant’s gesture, Richter picked up the gem and was greeted with the prompt.

Would you like to take ownership of this Bag of Holding? Yes or No?

Choosing “Yes” the gem disappeared, and he found a new small icon in the corner of his vision which looked like the black bag. Selecting it a 20x20 empty grid appeared. Unable to keep a look of childlike glee from his face he began placing and removing items from the bag. Just as described, as soon as he reached into the bag he simply had to focus on the object he wanted and it would materialize in his hand ready to be pulled out. He placed the magic staff in, and sure enough its entire length disappeared into bag. The staff took up a 3x1 area of the grid. He then decided to put a copper, silver and gold coin in the bag, and retrieved each in turn. He might

be excited, but he wasn’t about to throw all of his money into a black hole without making sure he could get it back first! Seeing as it was a success though, he placed the gold bands as well as his coins into the Bag of Holding. Thieves had been a major concern but now he could rest relatively easier needing only to keep track of the one bag. Each type of coin took up one slot in the bag, and clearly displayed the amount of each. He placed the rest of the gems back in the chest and placed it into the bag. Spending a few more moments he transferred over the contents of his old pack. Each herb stacked, and made it much easier to organize. Best of all it was Soul Bound! He finally didn’t need to worry about losing all of his items if he died again.

“Is there anything else I can do for you good sir,” Hafiz asked.

“Do you have any maps? Magic or otherwise?”

“I have a few maps of the surrounding areas and waterways, and one other item. Please give me a moment sir.” The white clad merchant walked to the back.

He came back after a few minutes. In his hands was a two foot long parchment that was bound with a green and yellow striped ribbon.

“This is a Traveler’s Map, sir. Are you familiar with their guild?” Richter shook his head.

“They are a potpourri of different skills and races. Some are magic users, others are fighters, some are simple woodsmen, and the only thing they have in common is a love of travel. Either singly or in groups they move across the land and create maps of the world. They sell these for exorbitant fees to the rich and powerful. The price is paid however, because this is actually an extremely versatile tool! It provides access to whatever information the Traveler imparted to this map. You can even do so mentally without opening the physical scroll. Finally owning the parchment lets you add your own geographic information. As the map is bound to you, the physical map will only show information that you wish shared!”

The item sounded amazing! As the description grew more detailed however, Richter’s heart began to sink. This must be an item of incredible cost! True he probably had the gems to pay for it, but Richter was not one to squander money. He might be looking at an eternity here, and being careless with money today could means centuries of hard times ahead.

The reluctance on his face must have been apparent. Hafiz moderated his excited tone, “Well as I said, normally this is only an

item for the wealthiest of patrons, but the information contained within is only as current as when the map was made. The particular Traveler that made the map lived at least two hundred years ago, possibly a good deal longer ago than that. It was found in the belongings of a recently departed nobleman. His family had fallen on hard times because of his love of the bottle. As such, he left his children with few assets and even less regard for him. They sold his items quickly and cheaply. So you see, with this particular map, I have no idea about the usefulness of any of the information contained within. The enchantments will still work either way though, sir, so it is a valuable item nonetheless. If you are interested, I could relinquish it for only one more small diamond."

Richter understood what Hafiz was saying. The information was most likely hopelessly out of date. It was a risk to buy it. Admittedly he could make his own maps, and so the item was very useful in and of itself. Xuetrix the imp had said The Land was bigger than the Earth. If that was true he had seen less than 1% of 1% so far. Richter weighed the pros and cons and decided that even if the Traveler's information was useless, the map itself was a good investment in his future. After all, G Maps had been about the most used app on his phone. He did need to know one thing though.

“How much are these diamonds worth, Hafiz?”

“Well sir, each is high quality and cut finely. So per carat each will be worth fifty gold coins.”

Richter’s eyes bulged again. Five thousand dollars! He dreaded asking the next question, but couldn’t help himself. “So how many carats were in the diamonds I have already traded you?”

“The diamonds you traded for the bag were two carats each. I will trade the map for this last diamond that is a bit over one carat,” the merchant replied promptly.

Richter sighed deeply. He almost wished he didn’t know. His calculations had been off. Those two diamonds had been worth more than his first car, a lot more! He tried to comfort himself that he couldn’t take it with him when he died, but he realized that now he could! He could and would take it with him! He tried to focus on the big picture, but his mind shouted that twenty five thousand bucks worth of stones was a pretty damn big picture!

Richter finally closed his eyes and rubbed the spot on his ear that always relaxed him. He had followed George Takei on facebook, and one day it had showed a pressure point called “Shen Men.” Apparently it translated to “heavenly gate.” He had tried rubbing it,

and actually found it was very relaxing! He closed his eyes to try to find the same peace with the gentle massage. Surprisingly a prompt came up. It was very strange seeing something even with his eyes closed.

Congratulations! You have learned the subskill: Pressure Points. Certain points on bodies can harm or heal. In unarmed combat, certain spots will draw your attention, and you will know intuitively what they do. This is a subskill of Unarmed Combat. As you have learned this subskill, you have also learned Unarmed Combat.

Congratulations! You have learned the skill: Unarmed Combat. You can attack and defend yourself without the crutch of weapons.

Thank you Hikaru Sulu! Richter was stacking up these skills! Taking his new skill as an omen, he nodded to Hafiz, and pushed the diamond across the table, picking up the map. “How do I use it?”

Again Hafiz touched the map and a white light flared leaving a clear ownership gem in its place, “Simply break the seal and pick up the gem,” he said.

Richter did as instructed.

You have found: Traveler’s Map. Would you like to accept ownership? Yes or No?

As if he had paid all that dough for nothing! He accepted “Yes,” and a small map icon appeared at the corner of his gaze. The gem crumpled to dust after he accepted ownership. He selected the icon, and a translucent almost opaque screen appeared to fill most of his visual field. It was like looking down from above. The map was centered on Law, and the city took up about half the screen. But what if I want to see more or a different scale, Richter thought. Immediately a bar appeared vertically at the edge of the map. Focusing he could make the slider on the bar move up and down and the map zoomed in and out. At maximum zoom, Richter could make out individual streets in the city. At minimal zoom the map showed Law as a small circle. The Kingdom of Yves was a roughly circular patch of green with a dotted line surrounding it. To the east of the kingdom was a yellow patch written as ‘Plains of Gold,’ and just north were the ‘Singing Hills’ and ‘Whisper Woods of Grevnt.’ Richter could see the Serrated Mountains and north of them was the Kingdom of Rione, but it was called the ‘Villages of Rione.’ Several other small kingdoms dotted the map. Farther north was a large swath of greyed out area called simply ‘the Wilds.’ The Forest of Nadria occupied the right side of the map. Going to medium zoom many dungeons, caves, crypts and other points of interest could be seen. It was strange, that some areas had more color on the map

and others were almost monochromatic. He soon figured out that the colored areas followed his own path since coming to the Land. He had to guess that more color meant more current information. This map was amazing!

He zoomed out to maximum and the colored part of the map became a small island in a sea of black. He zoomed back in. Off to the bottom right there was a small glowing arrow. Richter changed his focus and the map slid in that direction, no longer focused on the Kingdom. It moved past the Forest, over open ocean and then settled over a series of islands. The map named them ‘Isles of Lonyu.’ On the second biggest was a glowing marker. When he zoomed in he saw was a small dilapidated castle. Another prompt filled the screen.

You have discovered the Lost Citadel of the Mage Poquatil.

You have been offered a Quest: Right an Ancient Wrong I. The Traveler that made this map accepted a quest that remains undone. As he is now dead, and no previous owners of this map have completed it, the task now falls to you. You must travel to the Lost Citadel and find the remains of the mage Poquatil. Unlock the mystery of the Lost Citadel. Reward: Unknown. Yes or No?

A lost castle on a hidden island discovered on a treasure map? Uhhh, yes please! It seemed like the kind of quest that gave legendary of even artifact gear! It also seemed like the kind of quest that had monsters that would use his balls for ju ju bees at his current level. Looking closely at the map he saw that the citadel was considered a timeworn dungeon. That meant it was at least a thousand years old, and possibly up ten thousand years old! He couldn't tackle it at his current low level, but that wouldn't always be a problem now would it? No, it would not, Richter thought with a smile. Then he thought, it's kind of creepy to be talking to yourself in the third person. I need to stop this. He dismissed the map.

A second prompt had been hidden behind the map.

Congratulations! You have learned the skill: Map Making. Through careful observation of the world around you can map everywhere you have been. Finding additional maps will add to your personal map.

Hafiz had been looking at him as he worked with the maps functions. "Are you satisfied with your purchase, sir?"

"Oh yes," Richter replied with a smile.

“Hazaah! Most happy to have been of service then,” Hafiz replied with a smile of his own. “I will add these other standard maps as part of the price with the diamond. Now is there anything else I can help you with?”

“Not right now, but I may need a varied amount of items later. I will need them brought to Leaf’s Crossing, could you arrange that?”

“I am ever you humble servant, good sir,” Hafiz said bowing his head. Hafiz handed him a bundle of arrow shafts to affix the arrowheads too. Richter had said he was going to use his sprite arrows, but Sion had told him mixing magic was never wise. Even imbuing an arrow that was already enchanted could be dangerous. Deciding to follow his friend’s advice, Richter thanked Hafiz and accepted the shafts. He then equipped his rings and belt. He felt a perceptible change in his body as it filled out slightly reflecting his increased stats. Shaking hands with the merchant one last time, Richter and Sion left the shop. Two bells tolled as they walked outside letting them know there wasn’t much time left before they had to meet back at the inn.

They followed Terrod’s instructions to reach Aldimah’s Focus. The store front looked much as Terrod had explained it. The panes of purple glass were varied in color. As they walked into the door they

heard a chime. A tall man came to the front. Not wasting any time, Richter said, “Terrod sent us.”

“What does he need,” the man replied. There was none of the obsequiousness that Hafiz had displayed.

“It’s actually myself and my friend that are looking to trade,” Sion said.

“Then what do You need,” he asked gruffly.

“I’m looking for spells, my companion specifically for Air Magic, but I’m interested in anything useful.”

“By the laws of the King, magic can only be taught to and by members of licensed guilds.”

The merchant stared at them both, no one speaking.

Richter placed a small jewel on the counter.

He looked at what Richter had dropped and then looked back up.

“But laws don’t put food on the table, right? Come to the back. Ryun! Come watch the front!”

A teen aged boy walked up from the back to stand behind the counter. Richter and Sion followed the man, walking through a back

door into another room. He sat a circular table and offered for them to join him.

“Are you Aldimah,” Richter asked.

“No, Aldimah is right behind you,” pointing behind Richter and to the left.

A hand gripped his shoulder just as the man pointed, “Holy sh-!” Richter thought only the three of them were in the room! Scrabbling to turn quickly, he knocked over a chair. A golden skinned elf stood before him. She had silver hair, not with age, but as if someone had spun silver coins. She wore blue robes with arcane sigils in silver thread embroidered along the hem. She looked like she was Richter’s age, but he realized you couldn’t really tell in such a long lived race. A wry smile was on her face as she said, “I’m sorry. I get so bored cooped up in here.”

“Which doesn’t make it right,” the merchant said in admonishment.

“I’m sorry,” she said contritely letting her head hang slightly. “Hmph,” the man just grunted in reply, but he seem mollified.

“Please don’t give it another thought,” Richter replied with a faint smile. She really was remarkably beautiful. “Are you Aldimah?”

She gave a small laugh, her voice resounding with the purest tones. If the Wood Sprites were woodwinds when they spoke, she sounded like a violin. “Aldimah is my grandfather’s name. He founded this shop. He and the rest of my family left Law several years ago. I have been running the shop with our good friend Killik,” indicating the merchant. “You may call me Leandra.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Richter replied. “Terrod sent us here when I said I wanted to learn some spells.”

“You do know that it is against the King’s laws to learn spells outside of a registered guild?”

“We’ve been over that Leandra,” Killik said.

She gave another small laugh and looked at Killik, “Well you are the one that always told me to say it.” Looking at Richter she said, “My powers are focused in Earth and Water magic. I have some spell books that can teach you some low level spells, if you have the affinity and level to learn them.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem,” Richter said with a smile.

“Do you have any experience with Earth or Water? No? Then you can only learn skill level one spells then, but they should still help you.” She took three books from a shelf along the wall.

You have found: Book of Barkskin: This spell will increase natural armor by +2. This is a spell of Earth. Cost 20 mana. Duration: 20 min. Range: self. Cast Time: 1 second. Cooldown: N/A.

You have found: Book of Grease: This spell will make a 10x10 foot area slick with grease. It greatly increases the chance of anyone in the area falling down. This is a spell of Earth. Cost 15 mana. Duration: 30 sec. Range 25 feet. Cast time: 2 seconds. Cooldown: 10 min.

You have found: Book of Ice Dagger: This spell will throw a dagger made of ice at your target. This is a spell of Water. Cost 20 mana. Duration: 1 min. Range: 40 feet. Cooldown: N/A.

All the spells seemed pretty basic and uniform. That didn't mean they weren't also wonderfully useful. He especially liked the grease spell. In Richter's experience, even high level enemies could be affected indirectly by spells that changed the environment. He remembered a tough fight from years ago. He had to kill a dungeon boss. It was a death knight whose spell resistance was so high that no spells could touch it. A mage he was playing with had created an icy floor though, that made the knight fall on its back. Richter had been able to score an easy critical strike after that and win the fight.

“I’ll take them all,” Richter said. He was practically salivating thinking of increased capabilities.

“At two each that will be six gold coins.”

Errrrrrch! What was wrong with these people? It seemed like they were determined to bleed him dry! He had to fight the impulse to see if he bought two if he could get the third free. Six hundred dollars for three books! Say what you want about massed produced crap back home, it made things cheaper. He did have a thought though. Using Analyze on Leandra, he had her stats

Female High Elf, Lvl 8. Health: 160/160, Mana 190/250, Stamina 110/110.

“Each of these spells seems like it takes about 10% of your mana,” Richter said enjoying her shocked look. “I would think that a way for you to be able to reduce the cost of your spells would be valuable.” He withdrew the blue staff from his Bag of Holding. He handed it to her, allowing a closer examination.

Leandra took the staff looking at him, but then switched her gaze to the item in her hand. She focused, and a white flare that looked like when Futen identified items extended from her hands and surrounded the item. He look of surprise switched to one of

excitement and greed. She began muttering to herself. “Leg bone of a frost giant… Steeped in waters of Great northern glacier… Must have been enchanted by…” She came back to herself all of a sudden, seeming to realize how transparent she was being, and tried to shift her features to studied nonchalance. “It’s a nice trinket.”

A large wolf-like smile was on Richter’s face, and he settled into some serious haggling.

An hour later the two companions left the shop, and Richter had three new spell books and several restore health, mana and stamina potions. He had even bartered to obtain the recipes to health, mana, cure poison, and other useful potions for Sion, who assured him that the ingredients were easily found in the forest. For all of these goods, he ultimately gave her two gold and four silver coins. He was even able to secure a 10% discount on future purchases. Leandra didn’t seem to mind much though as she lovingly held her new staff. He could swear she was cooing to it. Before leaving the shop he opened and read each book. The same process occurred as with the book of Charm, each crumbling to dust and leaving him with a new spell. Reading them gave him two new corresponding skills. There was also a pleasing third prompt.

Congratulations! You have learned the skill: Earth Magic. Increasing you skill will unlock more spells.

Congratulations! You have learned the skill: Water Magic. Increasing you skill will unlock more spells.

Congratulations! You have learned the skill: Trade. Bargaining has afforded you a better price. Increasing this skill will allow for better prices and open new business opportunities.

Leandra agreed to keep an eye out for other spells books. Richter and Sion thanked her, and then hurried back to the inn knowing not much time was left. Going inside, one of the men behind the bar made eye contact with Richter, and nodded his head towards the back. They made their way by the smiling patrons and entered the kitchen, Terrod met them and walked back into the alley again. Immediately cautious, Richter and Sion slowed down, but Terrod kept walking without pause to a sewer grate and climbed down. Having no choice, they followed him in. They stayed to the side once they reached the bottom to avoid the stream of foul smelling water flowing down the tunnel. The sewer was made of dark stone with an indentation in the middle to channel the flow. They could stand upright, but Richter only just. Terrod was ahead of them, moving

along the right side of the tunnel torch in hand. They hurried to follow.

They took turn after turn until Richter had no idea as to their current location. He guessed that was part of the point though. Terrod finally stopped in front of a ladder leading up. He climbed it and opened a trap door at the top, allowing the sound of hushed voices to come though. They followed him up, and found themselves in a warehouse filled with boxes. It had a dirt floor and straw was scattered on the ground. There were twelve other figures there. Everyone quieted upon seeing Terrod.

“Alright gents. I’m glad we are all here. The two with me I vouch for. They will stay with me. Go back to what you are doing. I will fill them in on the plan.” The men continued on with their preparations and Terrod turned to Richter and Sion. “Alright, the plan is relatively simple. We are going to strike just after midnight. The Night Blades have a base on the wharf. That’s where we are now, but all the way on the other side of the harbor. We have been told this base is where they have our people. Now as you’ve already seen many of these buildings are attached to the sewers. If we attack above, you can be sure they will bolt underneath. So we have divided into two groups. You will be with me and we will be in the group attacking underneath.

We will try to disable anyone we find in the tunnels quietly. When we hear the attack above, we wait a moment so it draws focus, and then kill anyone attempting to flee. After that we move in, and attack these bastards from behind. Do you have any questions?”

“It sounds like there is going to be a lot of close fighting underneath. Sion should be in the above ground attack. He is tough in a close up fight, but he is absolutely deadly with a little room to wield his bow. Are you okay with that,” he asked his friend.

Sion looked at him somewhat concerned, “Are you sure you don’t need me to watch your back?” His gaze wavered to the other men for a moment, the implication clear that the Night Blades might not be the only danger.

“This is going to require trust on all of our parts. And I think it’s understood that there will be vengeance on anyone breaking that trust,” Richter said looking Terrod in the eye.

The man didn’t seem offended by the veiled threat, “I absolutely agree,” he said returning Richter’s gaze. “Randal,” he said over his shoulder summoning a man to him. “The sprite is going to be with you. Apparently he is pretty good with the bow.”

Randal looked at Sion with disbelief, “Hey little man, you sure you can handle yourself, *urk*!”

An arrow was suddenly quivering in a crate only an inch from the questioning man.

“I didn’t even see him move…,” Randal said in disbelief. He continued in a respectful voice, “We will count ourselves lucky to have you among our number sir sprite. Please come with me and we will figure out the best role for you.”

Sion walked off with the man, leaving Richter with Terrod. The reserved man look at Richter, “The walk to their base by tunnel should take the better part of an hour. We will leave at eleven bells. Take the time to center and prepare yourself. We will be safe here until it’s time.” He walked away to confer with the other men.

Richter decided to spend his time using his new powers. He started with Ice Dagger, mostly because it sounded coolest if he was being honest. Focusing upon the spell, he immediately felt a chill in his hand. Strange, he thought. He let go of his focus and the sensation disappeared. It hadn’t been painful or unpleasant, just surprising. Looking at a crate against the wall he invoked the spell. His arm shot out of its own accord and a one foot dagger made of ice sprung from his finger tips and struck the crate. It penetrated the

wood and stuck there. He walked up to it and examined the blade. It had a simple spiral handle with no cross guard. The “blade” was a cone coming up from the hilt. He wrenched the blade to the side, but it did not snap in two, apparently the ice that comprised it was extremely dense. He was able to pull it out of the crate and saw that it ended in a wickedly sharp point. It also remained solid in his hand and he was able to slam it back in the crate, leaving it stuck there. He hadn’t counted one being able to use the dagger after it was “thrown.” He would never be without a weapon again!

Next he cast Barkskin. His skin grew rough, and the sensation in his fingertips decreased slightly. Drawing the dagger from the crate he scraped the point along his skin with little effect. He pressed lightly and then somewhat harder before it was able to pierce his skin despite its sharp point. He was clearly not impervious, but the spell was a large improvement to the unarmored parts of his body.

Last he cast Grease. The floor looked slightly shinier and dark in the torch light, but otherwise there was no real effect. He was wondering how to test it, when on the men to his right fell with a loud curse. Another fell trying to help him. They looked around with irritation until seeing Richter’s sheepish expression. The tirade that

followed convinced him to sit quietly and wait for the operation to begin.

CHAPTER 21



Richter, Terrod and two other men, Jason and Jeremy, made their way along the tunnels. The two men were in front checking for traps as they were nearing the Night Blades hideout. They had already led their group past two tripwires. A shuttered lamp provided the barest illumination. The lead man, Jason, held up his hand and gestured around the corner. “They are right around the corner,” he said softly. “There are two of them. Now I can take one from a distance. The question is, are you any good with that,” he asked indicating Richter’s bow.

“I can handle myself. I can’t guarantee a silent kill though. I’m assuming quiet is what we are going for.”

“As long as we can kill them quickly, and keep them from getting back into their lair we should be safe enough.”

Richter snuck a glance around the corner. He could see two vague shapes standing about 5 feet apart. Unlike their entrance to the tunnel, it appeared that there was a door built into the side of the sewer tunnel. The closest was about 30 yards away.

“I am pretty sure I can get a chest shot on the closest one,” Richter said.

“Okay then, I can sneak relatively safely another 10 yards down the tunnel before they should be able to detect me,” Jason said cocking a crossbow. “After I go around the corner, count to ten and then take your target out. If you hear shouts come around the corner immediately before these motherless trogs kill me.” With a nod at Terrod, he went around the corner.

Richter counted silently. Unfortunately he had only gotten to five when the screaming started. Terrod and Jeremy went around the corner immediately. Richter was only a half-step behind. Jason was on the ground, blood freely flowing from his left foot. The thief that

had been closest to the door had a small crossbow out, and was aiming at the downed man. The other thief was turning to the door, clearly about to enter and sound the alarm.

Richter took in all of this in an instant. In even less time he choose his target, aimed and fired. The closest thief was shot through the chest and his crossbow discharged harmlessly into the sewer floor. The other one was able to make it through the door and raise the alarm, though. Though he did not notice, a message indicator appeared in Richter's side view.

The man on the ground held up his hands and shouted "Stop! Don't step in the puddles, they are studded with spikes!" A trip wire was seen across the length of the tunnel. Jason must have stepped over it, but had then stepped into a pool of water on the other side and impaled himself on a concealed spike. Terrod went to him and bandaged the foot quickly, stemming some of the blood flow. He murmured to the man who nodded with a pained look on his face. Terrod looked at Richter, "We keep going. Our men above will be slaughtered if they attack alone. It's just that now we will bear the brunt of the attack, and they will attack from behind. Are you with me?"

Richter simply said, “I finish what I start.” He cast Haste upon himself and readied another arrow.

Terrod raised his mace and pulled open the door. He slammed it shut again immediately as two thuds were heard and the door quivered. A third thud was punctuated by a crossbow bolt piercing the door. He smiled wildly, “Two on the left and one on the right,” and then he opened the door and dove through Jeremy right behind him. Richter stepped up to the door and scanned for enemies. Terrod was fighting one and Jeremy was on the left fighting the other two. There was no way for him to have a clear shot, let alone imbue his arrow. The blast could easily damage his two fighters. Worse he could hear feet on the stairs at the back of the room, the steps quickly growing louder. Left with no other choice he cast Grease.

What happened next would have been funny if it weren’t a life or death situation. All five combatants started wind milling their arms as they struggled to keep balance. Terrod went down first and Richter shot his opponent in the shoulder dropping her to the ground. Jeremy managed to collapse into a chair, his two opponents falling on the floor. Richter felt bad for a moment ending the lives of men that could not defend themselves, but then another thief came down the stairs. The thirty second duration of the spell hadn’t ended yet so

he fell flat on his face upon entering the small room. Richter placed an arrow in the chest of both of Jeremy's opponents in quick succession. He then imbued an arrow and shot it at the thief who had come down the stairs. The man had managed to climb to all fours and took the arrow in the head. The force of the blow sheared away most of his face, splattering blood and flesh over the floor. Nocking another arrow, he saw Terrod drive a knife into his enemy's throat. One of the other thieves had not moved, Richter's chest shot coupled with the thief's prone position allowing for a critical strike and instant death. The last thief had turned over a table and was hiding behind it. Breathing a deep sigh, Richter knocked another arrow and charged it for several seconds before firing at the table. It struck the table top and exploded it inwards. The thief was thrown against the wall stunned. Jeremy carefully walked forward and then stabbed him in the heart.

Amazingly, all three of them had made it through the fight unscathed. Other than some bumps and bruises that is. Not wasting their initiative they moved to the stairs. Terrod looked at Richter, "Shoot up the stairs with your power arrow. Clear'em out."

Richter peeked up the stairs which were mercifully clear. He nocked an arrow and held the charge until the black flashes ran over

the gold aura then released. The arrow struck the wall at the top of the stairs. The resultant boom in the confined space made all of their ears ring, but judging from the cry of pain at the top of the stairs, the thief that had been hiding at the top suffered far worse. Jeremy and Terrod rushed up the stairs.

Richter recast Haste, not wanting the spell to run out in the middle of the fight. About a third of his mana was gone, but his health was full and his stamina had only decreased by a tenth from his exertions and limited use of Focus.

He followed behind the others. At the top of the stairs, Terrod and Jeremy turned left and immediately started swinging their weapons. Richter looked to the right, but saw nothing except a darkened hallway. He turned to cover his comrades, and immediately felt an intense pain in his lower back! A warning indicator showed massive damage and his health dropped by one hundred points! Turning his head he saw a man behind him. The thief had had stabbed him with a dagger in low back at the break between his chest plate and armored pants. The bastard must have been stealthed and then crit'd him! Muffling a scream he threw his elbow in the thief's face, and heard the crunch of a nose. He lost his bow in the process, but the blade came out of his back as he got a couple feet of space

between him and his attacker. He invoked Ice Dagger, but his cast was off and it failed to pierce the leather armor the thief was wearing. The thief lunged with his dagger and Richter twisted to the side, the blade slicing into his pants. Luckily their reinforced nature kept it from biting deeply into his skin. He grabbed the thief's wrist with his right hand. They strained for a moment, Richter struggling to control the thief's blade hand. His increased strength was apparently just enough to keep his opponent from gaining the upper hand. Richter drew his sword across his body with his left hand and slammed the pommel into an already ruined nose. The first strike caused a soft sound like slamming a hammer into meat. The second pommel blow caused a deeper crunch than the first as the delicate bones in the face crumpled under the steel ball at the end of his hilt. The man screamed in total agony. Richter used the man's disorientation to wrest the dagger from his hand. He plunged the thief's own dagger into the man's neck. A spurt of arterial blood sprayed across the wall and Richter's face when he withdrew the blade.

The pain that he had been able to ignore for a few seconds slammed back to the forefront of his consciousness making his vision dim. He invoked his healing ring, which took the edge off of the pain. Reaching into his bag he pulled out a health potion. The

sounds of pain coming from the other room let him know that he didn’t have time to waste. He cast Barkskin, castigating himself for not casting it prior to coming up the stairs. Shoving the thief’s dagger through his belt, he sheathed his sword and picked up his bow. Placed an arrow on string, he hobbled into the next room. The sight that greeted him was not a welcome one.

Terrod had said the Night Blades were a gang about forty strong. An informant had told him that normally only ten to fifteen were in the hideout at night. The rest were out conducting various business and nefarious activities. After all, nighttime was worktime for the thieves. Counting the five that had already died and the few that were on the ground, the dozen or so still standing meant that about half the guild must have been present during the attack. Not counting Terrod, Richter or Sion, there were only six fighters left fighting the rogues tooth and nail.

The only thing that seemed to be preserving his group was that the thieves were fighting cautiously to keep themselves away from the door to the outside. When one crossed in front of the door, a blue streak struck her in the leg causing an audible snap. Well that explains that Richter thought. The thieves were positioning the fighters as a shield against Sion. It wasn’t a bad plan as they had

greater numbers and would wear down the band of inexperienced fighters down soon enough. Then they could rush the sprite en-masse and overcome him. That didn't even take into account the reinforcements that could arrive at any time. Richter decided it was time to ruin their day.

Drawing his bow, he imbued an arrow with minimal force and shot at the closest thief. Not waiting to see results he switched to the next and the next. Over the next few minutes, Richter and Sion took shots of opportunity and their punishing fire broke the will of their opponents. The thieves began throwing their weapons down and falling to their knees. A couple tried to run out into the street, but an arrow from both Sion and Richter landed critical shots in their backs and ended their concerns for the matters of this life. Unfortunately, two more of their group had been killed in the time it took to subdue the thieves. It meant nine of the attacking group had been killed or injured.

They were left with four fighters plus Richter and Sion now guarding three thieves. Two of the standing fighters were wounded with a leg or arm severely hampered. Terrod's left eye was swelling shut. The potion and the healing magic of the ring had restored the majority of his health, but Richter's constant movement had

reopened the dagger wound in his back causing a small bleeding status. He placed several healing herbs into his mouth and handed a few out to his comrades. Terrod was shouting into the face of one of the prisoners.

“Where are they? I know they haven’t left this building yet so where are they.” The thief stared back insolently. Terrod struck him in the face and then repeated his question. No response. Terrod kicked the man in the chest knocking him down. When he yanked him back up and repeated the question, the man just glared and then spit on the floor.

Richter’s mana was almost completely depleted at this point, and continual use of Focus to avoid hitting his allies had left him with only 20% of his stamina. Neither was refilling quickly. He had to invest more into Wisdom, especially if he was going to start expanding his spell base. Knowing that even a relatively small force of thieves would wipe them out in their weakened state, Richter stepped forward, “Terrod, let me try.”

Looking at the prisoner, “Look. I know you don’t want us here. We don’t want to be here. There has been blood spilled on both sides. Maybe we are all at fault, but that doesn’t matter. What matters is that we work together so that we may all see the sunrise. I could

continue to let fire fly between you and my friend here, but I don't have the time. Please just show decency and tell us where the captives are?" Richter's tone was full of calm and serenity.

Looking up at Richter, the thief replied, "You, and everyone you love, are dead. You think you accomplished something here tonight? Ha! These were our rookies. The ones that were only good for making dinner and ensuring the building didn't burn down. We will refill our ranks, and when our veterans return, I will enjoy seeing you peeled like a grape!"

Richter nodded during this entire response, looking thoughtful and not interrupting. At the end, he firmed his lips, nodded once more, and then drove his dagger into the thief's eye. The body start spasming, and even as he cleaned his blade on the dead man's clothes, the right leg continued to kick erratically. With a deep sigh he moved to the next kneeling man.

"Look. I know you don't want us here. We don't want to be here. There has b-"

The man interrupted, "We are both at fault! I agree, please let me help you find your friends!"

“Thank you, lead the way,” Richter said. Terrod stared at him with wide eyes.

The man walked ahead of them to a blank wall. Running his hand along the wooden panels, he found what he was looking for. A small square of wall depressed, and the thief placed his hand inside. They heard a click, and then a section of wall opened. Dragging the door open, a small room could be seen with a trap door in the floor.

“Open it,” Terrod said.

The thief looked nervous, but did as he was asked. As soon at the hatch was lifted, the smell of unwashed bodies with human waste was palpable. Faint wails of despair came out of the hole.

“Get them out of there,” Terrod screamed grabbing the man by the nape of his neck and shoving him toward a ladder.

“Everyone! It’s Terrod. We are getting you out of here, come up the ladder quickly as you can.”

Stinking, weakened figures climbed up the ladder and stood to the side. Upon seeing the thief many began to hiss and grumble. One dwarf wrapped his hands around the man’s neck to throttle him. Terrod had to pull him off, saying they still needed the thief alive. About thirty prisoners made their way up the ladder, Terrod staring in

each face before moving to the next. When no one else came up he grew frantic, “Is anyone else still down there? Isabel! Where is Isabel?”

An older dwarf said, “They separated her and a few others from the rest of us as soon as we got here. We haven’t seen her in days.”

Terrod stomped towards the thief with murder in his eyes.

“Th-they sold her,” the thief stammered backing up. “Some of the King’s friends keep nonhumans on their estates as slaves. They use them for cheap labor, sport… or pleasure.”

With a cry, Terrod threw himself at the prisoner, pummeling him with his fists as he cried in rage. This time it was Richter who had to save the man’s life.

“We don’t have time for this,” Richter said. Addressing the thief, “You will die here, now, unless you can help us.”

“There is a ledger,” the thief said. His facial bruises were making his speech slurred. “It’s in the chest where we keep our loot. Please don’t kill me!”

“Get on your feet,” Terrod snarled picking the man up by the arm. Turning to Jeremy he said, “Gather our dead, and lead our people back through the tunnels. Make sure to get Jason and the other

wounded to a healer. Be vigilant, but move quickly. Go!" Turning to Richter he asked, "Will you and your friend stay with me?"

"We finish what we start," Richter replied. Sion nodded.

"Where are we going," Terrod asked the thief.

"This way."

The man walked back towards the stairs, and past into the hallway where Richter had suffered his sneak attack. Reminded he told the thief, "If you are planning on leading us into a trap, you had better be sure that it kills us all at once, or I will put an arrow through you head. After seeing how you treated those people, it would be a pleasure."

The thief whimpered, but nodded. They walked down the hallway on edge. The only reassuring fact was that it was narrow enough that sneak attacks could not come from the rear. They reached a large oaken door which the thief pushed open. Biting his lip, he pointed to the first stone after the door and said, "Don't step on it."

Skirting the trap, they followed him into the room and saw a large chest sitting in the middle.

"What's the catch," Richter asked.

“I will tell you but on one condition. You have to let me go, and kill the other thief you kept alive. The only way my own gang doesn’t kill me for failure is if they think I was never here. I want your word.”

Terrod moved forward, “I’ll get the answer out of you some other way,” he said raising his mace.

“Stop,” Richter said. “We don’t have time for this! I swear not to kill you, and will let you deal with the other thief. Tell us how to get the ledger!”

“That entire chest is a decoy. It has a powerful sleep spell bound to it which causes hours of unconsciousness in anyone who touches it. The real chest is over here.” The thief walked over to painting and took it down from the wall. Behind it was a chest the size of a microwave. “I don’t know how to open it though, and it weighs an incredible amount.”

“That’s not a problem,” Richter said. Taking his Bag of Holding he slipped it over the chest, reducing its apparent weight of 310 kg to 31 kg, well within the tolerance of his strength.

Terrod stared at him, “Will your wonders never cease.” Walking back, they took care not to trigger the trap, and walked back to the

remaining prisoner. Richter handed a dagger to the helpful thief, “I am not here to do your dirty work. Do what you must.”

Taking the dagger, the man slit his former comrade’s throat with no hesitation. Seeing Richter’s outstretched hand, he gave the dagger back. They walked down the stairs and back into the tunnel. Richter looked at the thief and asked, “What is your name.”

“I am called Nil.”

“Well Nil, we made a deal of knowledge for service. You knowledge of the chest for my service of sparing your life. But you owe me for saying you from him,” indicating Terrod. “He would kill you despite what I agreed to. Now say you owe me for saving your life.”

“I owe you, kind sir.”

“Say it again.”

“I owe you my life, sir!”

“And now say it one more time,” Richter said enunciating each and every word.

The thief clearly knew what this meant, but could say little in rebuttal. After seeing the murder and rage in Terrod’s eyes, there

was no denying that he owed his survival to Richter. He bowed his head and spread his arms wide. “I owe you, my Lord.”

Richter looked the man in the eye and said, “Thrice heard and witnessed.”

Nil has agreed to do you a favor. Failure to do so when asked will cause a decrease in his reputation with all beings, and other unknown consequences. Keep in mind, your word means everything!

“Now run,” Richter said. “I will collect on what you owe me one day.” Nil ran off giving credence to the old saying of vanishing like a thief in the night. Richter, reminded of the state of the refugees they had rescued, could not leave it like this. Casting Grease once more on the room they had just left, he threw Terrod’s torch into the mix and was rewarded by a whoosh of flame as the furniture and walls caught light. Richter, Sion, Terrod and the man who had been guarding the final thief then turned their backs on both the light of the fire and the darkness of their deeds, walking on into the gloom of the tunnel.

CHAPTER 22



They made their way back to the inn without incident. While on the way, Richter dealt with the prompts that littered the edge of his vision.

Congratulations! You have reached skill level 5 in archery. +2% bonus to aim. +2% bonus to damage.

Congratulations! You have reached skill level 4 in Imbue Arrow. +5% damage. +5% speed of mana flow.

Congratulations! You have advanced to level 4 in Herb Lore. Herbs are 3% more effective. Increased chance of finding higher level herbs.

Congratulations! You have advanced to level 2 in Focus. Zoom increased by 0.1x

You have proven yourself to be Honorable. You chose to save the life of a comrade rather than eliminate a threat. +2 to Charisma, 3% decrease in critical strike chance and critical strike damage.

The last seemed a bit of a double edged sword, but he was satisfied with the bargain. Richter would never know for sure, but since coming to the Kingdom, interacting with others had been of the utmost importance. From meeting Caulder, to Rosy's referral to Terrod, to Leandra selling him the spells that had quite possibly been the deciding factor in the battle with the thieves, his ability to interact with those he had met clearly altered his life here. If he was going to succeed in this new world, he could not do it alone, and he would continue to need help. He would take all of the Charisma he could get!

The next prompt was what caught his attention though.

Congratulations! You have won +500 fame points! You have freed those falsely imprisoned, they will spread word of your bravery!

CHIME!

Congratulations! You have advanced to Reputation Level 2! “I think I’ve heard of you.” New quests and opportunities will become available to you!

You have completed the Quest: Fight for those Who Cannot I. The nonhumans of Yves will now look upon you favorably. Many may decide to come to the Mist Village. Bonus Reward: The contents of the thieves’ chest. Reward: 3500 XP

TRING!

You have reached level 9! Through hard work you have moved forward along your path. As a Chaos Seed you gain 6 points to distribute to characteristics instead of the usual 4. You also get 25% advancement to the skill of your choice! Crush your enemies, honor your allies, LIVE!

Richter was once again faced the pleasant dilemma of how to allocate his points. The real difficulty with his abilities was that they were almost all mana dependent. His most powerful skill was still Imbue Arrow, and that was a serious drain. Many game players liked to specialize in one area. That was never Richter’s style. He liked to have the ability to grow in many directions. His value as a player always came from finding unorthodox solutions to problems through combinations of his skills and abilities. He liked to think that where

others saw problems, he thought of solutions. He saw no reason to change his style now. So he put all of his points into the only characteristic he had not directly invested in yet, Wisdom.

Name: Richter
Age: 24
Level: 9, 37%
Health: 280 Mana: 210 Stamina: 160
Strength: 15
Agility: 17
Dexterity: 30
Constitution: 16
Endurance: 16
Intelligence: 19
Wisdom: 18
Charisma: 20
Luck: 14
Abilities:
- **Limitless**
- **Gift of Tongues**
- **Winds of Change**

Skills:
- **Herb Lore Lvl 4; 11% to next level, 100% affinity**
- **Potions Lvl 1; 0% to next level, 100% affinity**
- **Analyze Lvl 4; 82% to next level, 100% affinity**
- **Stealth Lvl 4; 51% to next level, 100% affinity**
- **Archery Lvl 5; 17% to next level, 100% affinity**
  - **Imbue Arrow Lvl 4; 15% to next level, 100% affinity**
  - **Focus Lvl 2; 6% to next level, 100% affinity**
- **Swordsmanship Lvl 1; 88% to next level, 100% affinity**
- **Small Blades Lvl 1; 11% to next level, 100% affinity**
- **Unarmed Combat Lvl 1; 10% to next level, 100% affinity**
  - **Pressure Points Lvl 1; 15% to next level, 100% affinity**
- **Light Armor Lvl 3; 12% to next level, 100% affinity**
- **Air Magic Lvl 3; 38% to next level, 100% affinity**
- **Life Magic Lvl 1; 49% to next level, 100% affinity**
- **Earth Magic Lvl 1; 46% to next level, 100% affinity**
- **Water Magic Lvl 1; 19% to next level, 100% affinity**
- **Map Making Lvl MAX**
- **Trade Lvl 1; 11% to next level, 100% affinity**

Marks:
- **Master of Mist Village**

Resistances:
- **Air 50%**
- **Mental 15%**
- **Spiritual 15%**

Race: Human (Chaos Seed)
Reputation: Lvl 2 “I think I know that guy!”
Alignment: Neutral
Language: All

Richter finished with his internal management and enjoyed the increased regeneration of his mana bar at corner of his vision. By the time they had arrived at the ladder that led to the alley behind the inn, a fair amount of his mana had recovered. He still felt some aches from bruises, and walking shot pain into his lower back where he had been stabbed. These were minor annoyances now though, rather than debilitating injuries. The healing abilities in this world were amazing. His healing herbs were truly magical. St John’s Wort eat your heart out!

“We need to go back to Aldimah’s Focus,” Terrod said once they were back in the inn. “I’m not sure what protections are on that chest, but I’d be surprised if there were not both magical and nonmagical traps. Killik and Leandra should be able to help. Will you come with me? You convinced the thief to give us the chest. I’ll happily relinquish the contents of the chest, but please let me see the ledger!”

At Richter’s nod, Terrod spent a few moments checking in with all of the former captives. He had apparently not rented out any rooms

since the first trouble with the Night Blades several days prior. He had foreseen that the nonhumans would need a place to stay away from prying eyes until he could get them back out of the city. Richter asked if the gang knew Terrod was involved with getting the nonhumans out of the Kingdom. If so, they would obviously come to the inn looking for retribution. Terrod said the arrangements were made through intermediaries, and his name should not have come up. He still seemed a somewhat uncertain though.

Terrod passed on the care of the nonhumans to his staff who assured him that everyone would be fed, given a bath and a place to stay. The wounded were already being cared for and the dead laid by the fire with what were clearly loved ones sobbing over the bodies. Three fighters had given up their lives in the fight. Terrod, Sion, Richter and Jeremy walked out into the night. There wasn't much noise other than their footfalls. Terrod looked at Richter, "Not everyone would have the stomach to kill a man on his knees like that."

Richter answered without looking back. "Where I am from horrible things happen every single day. No one helps. We even have the ability to know about atrocities on the other side of the planet, but nothing changes. I personally, was too weak or too scared to do

anything about it. I don’t like slavers, and that is what you are if you hold an innocent against their will and intend to profit by it. That is what this Kingdom seems to be approaching. When the Night Blades tried to sell people, they crossed a line. Now that means they were on one side, and I was on the other. I don’t regret killing that man. I am happy the world has a bit less evil in it.”

“You let the final thief go,” Terrod observed. “That Nil, who killed his own man.”

“Everyone makes mistakes. Nil’s was being part of a group that had partaken in the slave trade. I do not enjoy killing, but as I said, I will not apologize for making the world a better place. Now all three of those men who surrendered were given the chance to make amends. The first was asked twice by you. Then in the most reasonable terms I could manage, I asked him a third time. Now even where I come from, neither god nor man can ask for more than that. So when a man has been given every chance to amend for a heinous crime, and yet still decides to stand defiant on the wrong side of the line,” Richter finally turned to look at Terrod, “I will snatch the soul out his body, and smile right after.”

Terrod looked back at him, “I think we understand one another.”

They arrived at the magic shop, and Terrod lead them around to the back door. He knocked once and then waited. The familiar face of Killik filled the window, and then they heard a bolt being drawn back before he opened the door. The filed into the room with the table Richter had seen before. Terrod wasted no time. “We took a chest from the Night Blades. We need it opened.”

“Why did you bring us this trouble in the middle of the night,” Killik said heatedly. “You know how hard I work to keep Leandra away from this!”

Terrod took the abuse silently, and then said, “It’s the only way to find Isabel.”

“Of course we will help,” Leandra said coming down the stairs set in the back of the room. “Killik get your tools. Where is the chest?” The man looked like he might argue, but then changed his mind, and did as he was bidden.

“I have it,” Richter said. “Where would you like me to put it?”

“One moment,” she said. She placed both hands over the table. There was a blue glow, and a circle inscribed with runes appeared on the table. “Set it here.”

Richter retrieved the chest, and placed it on the table.

Killik returned with a leather bound item. Unrolling it next to the chest, various metal implements could be seen, each in its own specific place. He looked at the four of them, “Just stand back, and let us work.”

Killik and Leandra huddled around the chest murmuring to each other. They circled it several times planning their avenue of attack. A lot more than several times actually. The next thing Richter knew he was being shaken awake from the chair where he had sat while waiting. Sunlight streamed through the window and the sounds of foot traffic could be heard. All the innocuous events of that occurred, and were in turn ignored, each and every morning. This morning however, they were remarkable to Richter, standing in contrast to the blood spilled and lives lost the night before.

His focus was quickly pulled to what was in front of him. The chest lay on the table the lid ajar. Leandra and Killik sat nearby looking drained. “That thing was a nightmare. You’re lucky you brought it to us,” Killik said.

“That bad,” Richter asked rubbing his eyes.

“Well not bad if you would have enjoyed your blood boiling and parts of your body sloughing off, namely your c-”

“Leandra,” Killik interrupted sharply. Looking back at Richter, “Point is the chest is open now. We will let you handle your business. I only did this for Isabel. Come Leandra. We are going to leave them to it.”

The young mage complained but Killik was hearing none of it. He herded her out to the front of the store and out of sight.

“Who is Isabel,” Richter asked.

Terrod paused on his way to open the chest, “A wonderful woman. A wood elf. She is… precious to me,” his voice catching at the end. Richter now understood Terrod’s passion to free the nonhumans. Terrod opened the lid, and set it back on the table. The chest was less than half full. Several vials were on top that he placed to the side. Underneath was a thin book bound in brown leather. Terrod took the book and began to go through it page by page, the other contents of the chest already forgotten. Sion moved to the vials examining them, leaving Richter to examine rest of the contents of the chest. The first thing he saw was a gilded dagger in a sheath that looked like faceted crystal.

You have found: Glass dagger. Damage 15-18. Durability 250/250. Item class: Uncommon. Quality: Superb. Weight 0.5 kg

The blade was almost ridiculously light, but the edge seemed wickedly sharp. The blade's material was the same clear crystal that the sheath was made of. When he turned the blade he could see through it with no issue. Turned on the other axis the thin blade seemed to almost disappear. Setting it to the side, he looked at the rest of chest. There was a jumble of copper, silver, and gold coins, with some random jewels. He had a thought and just poured the content into his bag. Gotta love that autosort! It looked like there had been roughly two hundred copper coins, thirty silver and ten gold coins. Seven stones of varying types made their way into his inventory. There were also two rings that glowed slightly. They just appeared as "Magic Rings," he would have to see if Leandra could identify them. At the bottom of the chest was a necklace and a book. The familiar and frustrating prompt, "Magic necklace and Magic Book," greeted him when attempting to examine them. He HAD to find a way to identify items himself. Sion held up the bottles one by one.

"Frost resistance, Fire resistance, Healing, Mana replacement." He paused before lifting the last. Richter examined it, "Magic Potion," appeared on the prompt. Nodding understanding at Sion, he reached out his hand and placed it in his bag. The first four could prove useful

in the coming days. Terrod was still pouring over the ledger, and so Richter walked up front. Leandra was standing behind the counter, and that gorgeous smile was on her face when she saw him.

Smiling back, still a bit awestruck by the beautiful creature in front of him, he asked, “There are a few items I can’t identify. Can you help?”

“I have an identify spell, and I also have a reasonable amount of Lore, I can look if you like.”

Richter looked slightly confused, “What is Lore.”

“Oh, well there are two main ways to identify something. Magic is the most common way, either with ability, spell, scroll or item. Identification items are rare though. The other way is to have studied enough about magic that you can recognize some or all of an item’s properties. I have level 3 in my Lore skill which should work for most basic items. Now let’s see what you have,” she said with a small laugh.

Richter handed her the rings, necklace, book and vial. She looked over the necklace, running her hands along it, closing and opening her eyes slowly seemingly lost in thought. After a minute

she smiled reached out her hand. He took it and she placed it over hers with the necklace between them.

You have found: Necklace of Scry Defense. Will block all but the most powerful scrying spells. You will not be able to be seen by divination, identification, tracking or detection spells. Passive ability. Durability 200/200. Item class: Rare. Quality: Superb. Weight 0.4 kg

This might be the most impressive item he had found besides the magic core! Right now he was a small fish as far as this world was concerned, but if he kept making waves like say, attacking an established underworld guild, it was probably a good idea to protect himself from those who might look for retribution.

Leandra removed her hand, a little slower than she needed to in Richter's happy opinion. She repeated the process with both rings, one at a time.

You have found: Ring of Hidden Dangers. +25% to trap detection. Passive ability. Durability 15/15. Item class: Uncommon. Quality: Average. Weight 0.1 kg

You have found: Dungeon Ring. Will open most basic locks and some magical locks. Can be used four times per day. Durability

20/20. Item class: Uncommon. Quality: Above Average. Weight 0.1 kg

Both could come in handy! It was too bad Jason hadn't been wearing the first ring when they attacked the thieves. Leandra picked up the book and went through the same motions as before. Frowning she set it back down and focused. A familiar white light came from her hands. After a minute though she shook her head, "I'm sorry Richter, my Lore level isn't high enough for this, and it is resisting my identify spell. On the plus side though, it probably means it's very valuable!" She handed the book back to him.

Picking up the small vial, she immediately gave a small gasp. "I know what this is! It's a Potion of Clarity. I have seen one before, and it had the same clear water with little motes of light inside. This is valuable Richter!"

Somewhat taken aback he asked, "How valuable?"

"It depends on how much the experience bonus is and how long it will last for. The potion I saw increased experience by 15% for twelve hours and it was selling for one gold."

"So how much do you think a potion that increased experience by 25% for a day would sell for?"

“Oh at least three gold! That would be almost impossible to find though! I don’t know the all the ingredients to make the potion, but I know they are all difficult to obtain and expensive. Why do you ask?”

A slow and small smile grew on Richter’s face. Changing the subject he asked, “Can you teach me you Lore skill?”

“No, but I do have copies of a few of the books I used to obtain it. I can sell them to you if you like.”

Richter said yes and thanked her. She left to go get them out of her room, and Richard spent the time perusing her shop. He had noticed a mortar and pestle when leaving last time. Moving around he saw that they had extensive amount of magical ingredients, alchemy sets, mortar and pestles, measuring spoons and any number of other implements required to pursue the magical arts. Behind a glass cabinet were various types of potions. There was also a small library dealing with herbology, potions and a list of other subjects. Each item was clearly marked, and it was somewhat surprising that there were different grades of alchemical equipment ranging from average to superb. Richter assumed that the equipment theoretically probably ranged from trash to masterwork, just like his other equipment. From what he had seen of the determined man though, Killik would not allow trash or poor quality

inventory into his shop, and he probably simply didn't have access to exquisite or masterwork items. That might be all for the best for while an average alchemy set cost a few silvers, the superb quality was ten gold.

He picked a few healing herbs, and resolved to discuss the price of the other items with Leandra or Killik. As bright and sunny as the girl was, she was no less difficult a negotiator than Killik during their first bargaining experience. He was convinced that her personal desire for the staff was a large reason as to why he had gotten such a good deal on his spells.

Leandra came back to the front room carrying two thick books. They said History of Magic I and II respectively, "I'm warning you now, they can be pretty boring at times, but they got me to Lore level 2. Unfortunately, I don't have the third book, but there are others that can increase you Lore as well."

"I'd like all of the other books you have out here as well. I need an alchemy set and a way to transport it. Some healing, mana and stamina potions. Sion will pick all of the ingredients he needs for potion making and any herbs he needs. Oh, and all of your empty vials. I think I'll have a lot of things to sell," he said, grinning again.

After talking to Leandra, Richter decided to get the superb set of alchemy equipment. It was apparently needed to make higher level potions and also created potions of increased potency no matter their level. He had always believed in paying a bit more on the front end, rather than being nickel and dimed to death later on. It also wasn't a small thing to get back to the city if he needed an upgrade. Once he was back in the Mist Village, he was pretty much stuck with whatever he brought back until he could spend a few weeks and make it back into the Kingdom. Luckily she had hundreds of empty vials that he was able to bargain down to one vial per copper piece in light of the large amount he was buying.

The books were almost ridiculously expensive to Richter's mind. They ranged from three silvers to two gold pieces each. He supposed it made sense though. On Earth, before the printing press, only priests or nobles had access to books or even had the ability to read. He was insanely thankful that his Gift of Tongues seemed to extend to the written word. Knowledge was power in any world it seemed, and so he paid with minimal grumbling.

When the ingredient's Sion chose were added to the mix along with a few modest healing and mana potions, he ended up agreeing to pay about a fifteen gold pieces. That amount brought a smile even

to Killik's face. That smile reverted back to his customary scowl when Richter told him about the 10% discount Leandra had agreed to before, to which she just smiled sheepishly. That change in expression almost made the cost of everything worthwhile to Richter. Leandra and Killik packaged his purchases and he went back to check on Terrod.

Richter could see that things were not going great. A look of frustration was on Terrod's face. "Gah! They have written this in some code. I can only make out bits a pieces. I will need help to figure out book. I can't stand these delays!" He visibly composed himself, and then looked at Richter. "I will need time and the help of wiser minds than my own to read this, but I will find the other captives! I will find Isabel! I don't have the right to ask this, but when I find where she is, will you help me? Either way, I will fulfill my bargain to speak on your behalf to any that would join you. But," and his voice broke a bit, "I have to save her."

You have been offered a Quest: Fight for those who Cannot II. Isabel remains missing, and Terrod is besought with grief. He is placing all of his hope on that the ledger will provide her location. He is asking for your help once he finds out where she is. Reward: Increased relationship with Terrod. Yes or No?

“I will help you,” Richter said. This wasn’t just about getting people for his village anymore. This was his new life, and he wouldn’t just stand by when horrible things were being done. He would help if he could.

Congratulations! Your relationship with your Terrod has improved from neutral to friendly.

That was a little strange, getting his reward before he finished the quest, but okay, Richter thought.

Terrod heaved a sigh of relief. “I need to get some sleep. I wasn’t able to rest waiting for them to open that chest. I will head back to the inn and setup a meeting with you and some prominent nonhumans that might be interested in coming to your village. I won’t be able to get them together until nightfall, though.

“You should know that it isn’t only nonhumans that have trouble fitting into the Kingdom recently. Many men and women are struggling to provide food and the basic necessities for themselves. There is a building in the Grand Market where journeyman often went in days past. They could be found there by those who needed their services. These days many humans congregate in the Grand Market every day from all different types of professions and walks of life just looking for a few coins. If you aren’t too exhausted you could

stop by the market first before coming back to the inn. I have to warn you though, the difficulties of their lives have made some extremely bitter and hateful towards nonhumans. Be careful who you invite to join you. You'll find the Grand Market on the western side of the city halfway up hill."

Nodding at the information, Richter said, "Thank you Terrod. I will check out this Grand Market. I need a moment though," and walked back upfront. He reached into his bag, and then placed his hand on the counter in front of Leandra. She looked at him with a half-smile and curious expression. Her infectious grin brought one to his face as well. Trying not to blush he said, "I wanted to say thank you for all of your help. What you taught me saved our lives last night. I hope that I see you again very soon, but I was wondering if you could do me a favor until then and hold onto something for me." He nodded his head toward the hand he placed on the counter.

She leaned over, and he slowly peeled his hand away. He looked underneath it before moving quickly to reveal there had been nothing there. But her focus and distraction let him grab her other hand and place a beautiful opal in her palm. She gasped and gave a small shriek when she saw the iridescent colors play over its white surface.

Throwing her hands around his neck she gave him a big hug, and he realized that he couldn’t have found a better use for the jewel.

Congratulations! Your relationship with Leandra has improved from friendly to interested.

Charisma has increased by 1.

The moment would have been perfect if not for Killik’s glower. The man’s gaze threatened all manner of tortures if he didn’t let go quickly. Richter gave a small cough and stepped back, retreating out of the door with Terrod and Sion. While he walked though, he was still thinking of the way Leandra somehow smelled like caramel.

CHAPTER 23



They followed Terrod's directions to the western side of the city. They heard the Grand Market well before they saw it. Even this early in the day, a bustle of activity could be heard sounding like the drone of an enormous beehive, and evolving into the shouted voices of hundreds and then thousands of people. They turned a final corner and were confronted with a sea of tents and stands. The street they were walking on sloped down as it entered the Market and so they had a clear view of the countless vendors extending out in front of them. There was no uniformity to be seen! Pointed or flat topped, beige or a riotous collage of colors, the tents that comprised the bazaar did not follow any recognizable pattern. Some were as large

as a house and others so small it didn’t seem that they could fit a person inside.

Terrod had told them that the building they were looking for was at the center of the Market. The two friends began walking and melded with the chaos of people squeezing down narrow corridors between the tents. It was an assault on the senses, almost overwhelming. It made Richter glad that no one else could access his valuables in his Bag of Holding, because this setting must be a pickpocket’s dream.

Many sights grabbed Richter’s attention from food, to weapons, to exotic animals in cages. Even the people were varied in their speech, skin color and style of dress. Richter had wondered why his darker skin color had not raised any eyebrows in the people he had met, but he saw plenty in the Market that could represent every race on Earth and even people who wouldn’t fit any category he was familiar with. There were even a fairly large amount of nonhumans. Every tent also had at least one human, but in the Market the nonhumans at least stood tall and made eye contact.

The one place Richter did linger was a book seller, but the “magic books” they offered were less than genuine. The prompt that appeared when Richter examined them showed they were only

normal books. Merely traps to separate the gullible from their money. He decided to just press on, glancing back from time to time to make sure he hadn't lost Sion. Somehow he didn't think the sprite would appreciate a suggestion to hold his hand.

Two hours passed before they saw the columned building that Terrod had described. It wasn't just that the Market was large enough to require that amount of time, even though it *was* massive. Their slow pace had more to do with the press of people and the arrangement of the tents. It was a maze! Several times they had walked into a dead end and had to back track. One time only a grim glare and hands firmly on their weapons had backed down a pair of men that had clearly meant them harm. They did see occasional pairs of soldiers walking, but they were few and far between. It didn't escape Richter's notice that most vendors had at least daggers at their belt, and the larger tents had burly men looking over anyone that came close. The only real benefit of walking through the Market was that Richter got ample opportunity to use Analyze, and his increased Wisdom made it easier to replenish his mana. Ultimately he grew impatient and Richter grabbed an urchin who agreed to lead them to the building for a few coppers. Half an hour later their destination was in sight. Their guide told them the building was an

old converted temple though no one remembered what deity it had been once dedicate to. The locals simply called it the Hall.

With an abrupt transition the tents stopped, and a large arena of paved stones opened in front of them. Tents could be seen lining the edges of the rectangular area about the size of two football fields placed end to end. The small girl leading them pointed to one end of the open space and then disappeared back into the morass of tents. Richter wondered if her whole life had been spent inside of that canvas expanse. Dismissing it from his mind, they walked towards the Hall enjoying the relative freedom of personal space for the first time in what felt like a great while, though it had actually only been a few hours. Fountains and statues in various states of disrepair dotted the space as did small clusters of trees. Quartets of guards lounged at the edges periodically, presumably to be able to react to trouble quickly in any direction.

The density of people increased as they neared the Hall. There seemed to be some loose organization to the workers standing around. They walked up the steps and the relative quiet they had enjoyed at the center of the Market was replaced by the sound of many voices. Terrod had one contact that he trusted in the Hall, and they would just have to search for her. The inside of the Hall was

setup in a series of small platforms that the “agents” stood upon. The potential employers spoke to the agents who then led them to the appropriate workers. Along the walls there were more agents. They apparently warranted small booths and desks.

Terrod had told them it being an agent was a thriving business. Apparently everyone seeking employment had to register with an agent. The practice had been around so long now that it had been formalized by the Kingdom. Each agent was licensed and there were a finite amount of licenses at any one time. Anyone masquerading as an agent, or any worker trying to get employment without going through proper channels, would earn themselves a beating or imprisonment. The guards present in the building certainly seemed more alert than those outside. The limited number of agents worked in their favor as they quickly found the woman they were looking for, only needing to ask for directions twice. Terrod had referred to her as “Mama.”

Mama turned out to be a five foot nothing ball of fury. She gave directions like the crack of a whip, moving business along with the efficiency of a drummer on a Roman war galley. There was a clear protocol as the area in front of her booth lacked the milling chaos that characterized the rest of the building. Her customers had formed

an orderly line with a person moving up, handing over a piece of paper, and saying what they needed. A short conversation about the specifics of the contract ensued. She would then gesture to one of her several aids that stood nearby. Coins would exchange hands, then the aide and customer would walk off, presumably to retrieve whatever help the customer had come to obtain.

Somewhat at a loss, but not wanting to rock the boat, Richter and Sion joined the line. In what seemed like no time they were at the front and her hand was out, while looking down and writing the details of the last transaction in an open book in front of her. When nothing landed in her hand, she looked up with complete and utter disdain, searching for and finding the moron who had brought disorder to her carefully cultivated universe. Richter could swear he heard the people behind him backing up to show they were not with him, but he didn't dare look away from the woman before him.

"When my hand is out, I expect your reference to be placed in it. I do not work with people I do not know. I have found it to be a waste of my time. I do not like wasting my time. I do not like people that waste my time. Now you are just standing there looking indecisive. Indecision causes confusion. Confusion causes accidents. Accidents cause death! So before my mental anguish transforms into your

physical anguish, why don't you get out of my line!" Each word of her speech dripped venom, and rose in volume, until she was shouting at the end. This time Richter was sure everyone had moved away from him. And yes, he meant everyone. Out of the corner of his eye he caught Sion a good three feet away.

Blushing from the embarrassment of being dressed down like a child he said, "Terrod sent us. He told us you were the person we should trust."

Her face twitched as she digested this information. Her mouth opened and she continued in the same tone, but with perhaps a touch less volume, "And why should I trust that? Why should I trust you??"

Richter mind searched frantically before latching onto Terrod's last statement said over his shoulder as he walked away. Richter repeated it now. "He said to remember I should never lie to Mama."

Her face twitched again, and this time the left corner of her mouth turned up right before she broke into a large smile, "And how is Mr. Tall, Dark and Brooding?"

"He told me to convey his regards and apologies that he has not seen you recently. He is helping me with certain arrangements, but

he told me that in addition to his, ahem, unique resources, that you might be able to help me as well."

"Well that's likely true enough," she said loudly. The smile left her face and her sharp business tone came out again, "but I won't know until you stop standing there like idiots and tell me what you need."

"I need good people to live in, work in and grow my village. I am willing to pay a fair wage, and any that can open and maintain a business can keep the fruits of the labor as long as they pay a tax and also contribute to the overall defense and productivity of the village. I have heard that many talented people are going to waste here. I am willing to give them a home."

"Okay that's the cream, now what's the curdle? And don't try to sell me a sky of sunshine and the promise of no rain. Listen to the advice you got, you don't want to lie to Mama!"

This woman was tough. Taking a deep breath Richter replied, "It's in the Forest of Nadria. It has many resources but no infrastructure yet. We would be building from the ground up. I also would need anyone that came, to agree to leave the Kingdom for at least one whole year. Security matters to me, but I promise that anyone who wants to leave after a year, I will see safely back to the town of Leaf's Crossing."

“You ask a lot,” she said, staring at him. “I need to think this over. If you can wait, you can rest over there while I conduct my business with the rest of these good people. We will talk when I’m done.”

Nodding agreement, Richter walked to the area to she indicated on the side of her booth. He sat down on the floor, and Sion sat next to him. “Oh so now you don’t mind being near me? That was a dick move man,” he said to the sprite. Sion simply gave a shrug and sat in lotus position with his bow across his legs. Richter was pretty sure the little man had fallen asleep, and fought an irrational urge to give him a wet willie. Instead he leaned his back against the wall and waited. And waited. And waited. It was well past noon when the line of employers dwindled off. Richter had wanted to leave several times, but had stayed out of a mixture of respect for Terrod’s opinion, desire to have the best for his village, and honestly having nothing better to do.

When she finished with her last client, Mama placed a placard with a red “X” on her desk facing out and stood up. She motioned for Richter to follow her outside, and he nudged Sion, who annoyingly had been snoring softly for the past couple hours.

When they were outside on a terrace that ran around the three quarters of the building not facing the promenade, she started

talking. “I didn’t expect you to wait. It takes a lot for someone to sit on a stone floor with no real promise of obtaining what they desire. It normally takes either desperation or dedication. You don’t seem overly desperate to me.” They kept walking around looking at the masses of people on the ground to the sides of the building.

“Did Terrod tell you why they call me Mama? I’m guessing no, as he didn’t give you a written referral, despite knowing that is how I do things. Tell him he’ll get a slap in the head for that down the line by the way. So, they call me Mama, because I care about the people I represent. Every man or woman that gets a contract through me is paid and treated fairly. If there is ever an issue I make sure my people are taken care of, and then I deal with anyone that would cheat me and mine.” She looked meaningfully at Richter. He nodded back, not speaking but with a serious expression. Satisfied she continued, “Now because of this my workers apply themselves and work harder than others which makes the employers happy. Both the employers and the workers know that I only deal with solid and dependable people. That is why Terrod sent you to me. Now while I am not able to do as much as I would like for many people, I also do not make a practice of placing the wellbeing of my charges in the hands of someone I don’t know.”

Richter’s expression must have fallen a bit because she sharply said, “Pay attention! I said normally! You may be a special case. There are a few things in your favor. One,” and she held up her closed fist, extending her forefinger, “You showed patience this morning. Two,” another finger went up, “Terrod sent you. If that old warhorse vouches for you it means a lot. Three, there is something about you that makes me want to trust you. That doesn’t often happen. Now, while those three things might make me want to buy you an ale and see how firm that toosh is, they wouldn’t bring me to entrust the wellbeing of any of my workers with you. While you were waiting though, I had some people ask about you. There is a rumor that a particularly loathsome gang by the docks was attacked, and had a good portion of their members wiped out. During this bloodbath, some nonhuman captives were freed. No one is quite sure who did it, but a close friend of mine confided that his brother’s friend’s girlfriend’s long lost schoolmate, or some such rubbish, had been part of the raid, and that there was a curious late addition of a man and a sprite. Now you wouldn’t know anything about that would you?” As she had related the last points, they had walked to a secluded part of the terrace where there was no one to eavesdrop.

Richter looked at her. He was somewhat alarmed that she had made connection so easily. Not for any direct concern that she meant him ill, but that it raised the real possibility that the remaining gang members could find him and the others. True, she apparently knew Terrod well and he had said he trusted her implicitly, so it would be easier for her to connect the dots than someone outside of Terrod's immediate circle, but it was disquieting nonetheless. It made him anxious to conclude his business in the city and get back to the Forest. Despite his discomfort though, Richter still needed help, and Terrod had vouched for this woman. How could Richter ask her to trust him if he was not willing to do the same?

"I am sure that you understand the dangers of your question, for me, Terrod or anyone else involved. I am equally sure that it's not necessary for me to stress how important it is to be discreet, but I will anyway. That being said, yes, I was a part of the raid to free the nonhumans. We succeeded, but unfortunately lost some men along the way. We also did not free of all them as some had been sold as slaves to various nobles. We don't know who yet, but Terrod has a ledger that we were told can point us to those that were involved. The ledger was coded so he is working now to figure it out. When he

does, we are going to help him get the missing back. Specifically Isabel."

She listened closely while he related his story, when he mentioned Isabel though, her face broke with shock. "Isabel is missing? He tried to smuggle her out of the city? The fool! I told him not to trust those shifty Night Blades!" She stared out over the promenade for several minutes. "Okay. I understand why Terrod trusts you now. I have decided to help you. Now have you given thought to the type of people you need?"

"I was thinking masons, carpenters, farmers for crops and livestock, and guards."

"That's it? That's all you think is required to grow a village? How will you feed them while you wait for crops to grow? You will need hunters and fisherman. How will you clothe them when the seasons grow cold? You need weavers to make those clothes. How will you help those who get ill or injured? You will need a healer! There is more to a community than just buildings and defense!"

A host of responses went through Richter's head, but he ultimately decided on, "Will you help me?"

A smile replaced her stern expression, "That's what Mama is for!"

They went over the specifics for several more hours. Afterwards, she promised would speak to her workers and feel out who would be interested. When she told him the weekly wages most lived on he was shocked. These people were just being blatantly taken advantage of. She agreed it was well below what each was worth, but seemed resigned that this was now the way of the world. Richter told her that anyone that he decided to take with him would be paid the basic wage of four silvers per fortnight, and he would cover room and board for the first year. This brought another smile to her face and she assured him it would make it easier to convince people to leave Law. They moved onto other topics.

The first was that the workers had families, and she needed to know if they could come as well. Since Richter was planning to grow his community it seemed well in line with his goals and he readily agreed. The next topic was how to get people there. Trekking a large amount of people through rugged terrain with the possibility of animal or monster attack was daunting. He would have to hire a large amount of guards. The other option though was to use the river ways. Now buying several boats was not feasible, but renting a few river craft while expensive was manageable. It would also let him transport needed items like anvils and the core components for a

smelter to his village. Even though he was getting excited about the increased possibilities, the costs he had not foreseen were becoming daunting. He was relieved again that he had found the chest of jewels. Without their capital, reviving his new home might have been an insurmountable task.

The conversation continued to evolve to topics of hiring a ship wright, needing a saws and tools, and investing in a new stationary buzz saw that could be powered by the river to greatly increase productivity (he hedged off the last one, what were Mist Workers for it not hard labor). At the end of their conversation, Mama had a list of items that should be obtained and categorized them as necessary, beneficial, or simply desired. Richter had told her that he had worked with Hafiz before. She said she knew him and agreed he was a good choice for obtaining what was needed. She also said that by tomorrow there would be a strong list of candidates to join him. With a final thank you, Richter and Sion left, and made their way back to the Laughing Imp.

There were several men lounging out in front of the inn. It didn’t look like anything special to the untrained eye, but one casually got up to meet them and the other three tensed. “Inn is closed today, friend.”

“I’m here for a meeting. I helped Terrod secure the precious cargo inside. Get him.”

The man still stood in front of Richter, but sent one of his fellows inside. Terrod came out soon after and waved him inside. The mood of the former captives was much improved as they sat in small groups and talked smiling. It was amazing what being clean, warm and fed could do for your attitude. He followed Terrod to a back table that had five older nonhumans present, two dwarves, two elves and small humanoid that Richter couldn’t identify. He then used Analyze on all of them and found they were subraces: a mountain dwarf, hill dwarf, wood elf, high elf, and arcane gnome. More importantly though was the prompt that he was awarded.

Congratulations! You have reached skill level 5 in Analyze! In addition to the information you already received you will also be provided with basic information of the target’s race, the target’s name and the target’s disposition towards you.

Curious he quickly used his ability again on everyone present.

Name: Terrod. Human: Lvl 6. Health 170. Mana 120. Stamina 160. Disposition: Friendly. Humans are one of the shortest lived, but most prolific breeders in the Land. Humans have a broader affinity for

skills than other races. No special bonuses to race. Humans get four points to distribute per level.

Name: Sion. Wood Sprite Lvl 9. Health 210. Mana 190. Stamina 120. Disposition: Ally. Sprites have several subclasses which determine their specific powers. Wood Sprites are naturally gifted in tracking and woodcraft. They have a skill of imbuing their strikes with mana greatly increasing damage. Sprites get three points to distribute per level, and each level gives +2 to Dexterity.

Name: Hilda. Mountain Dwarf Level 10. Health 240. Mana 120. Stamina 260. Disposition: Friendly. *Dwarves have several subclasses that determine their specific powers. Mountain dwarves are a hardy folk that get bonuses to Constitution and Endurance each level. They have keen eyesight that gives them excellent night vision. Natural miners, it is said mountain dwarves can "smell" veins of precious metals. Increased resistance to negative physical effects. Increased affinity and resistance to Earth Magic. Mountain Dwarves get three points to distribute per level, and each level give +1 to Constitution and +1 to Endurance.*

Name: Poltan. Hill Dwarf Level 8. Health 250. Mana 130. Stamina 210. Disposition: Friendly. Dwarves have several subclasses that determine their specific powers. Hill dwarves are the most social of

the dwarven races. Highly skilled in crafting. One of the few dwarf races known to be skilled in ranged combat. Increased resistance to negative physical effects. Increased affinity and resistance to Earth Magic. Hill Dwarves get three points to distribute per level, and each level give +1 to Constitution and +1 to Endurance.

Name: Ulin. Wood Elf Level 10. Health 170. Mana 260. Stamina 110. Disposition: Friendly. Elves have several subclasses that determine their specific powers. Wood elves are gifted in archery, woodcraft, and healing. Increased accuracy and damage when using ranged weapons. Bonus to dodge. Wood Elves get three points to distribute per level, and each level give +1 to Dexterity and +1 to Intelligence.

Name: Wisteria. High Elf Level 12. Health 130. Mana 300. Stamina 110. Disposition: Friendly. Elves have several subclasses that determine their specific powers. High elves are gifted in archery and most magical arts. They have increased resistance to magical attack. Bonus to Intelligence and Wisdom each level. High Elves get three points to distribute per level, and each level give +1 to Intelligence and +1 to Wisdom.

Name: Berin. Builder Gnome Level 9. Health 140. Mana 190. Stamina 210. Disposition: Friendly. Gnomes have several subclasses that determine their specific powers. Builder gnomes are

obsessed with the application of knowledge. Known to make amazing devices and build fantastic structures. Gifted in magical crafting. Builder Gnome get three points to distribute per level, and each level give +1 to Intelligence and +1 to Endurance.

It was a pleasant to see how they all viewed him. Not overly surprising though, considering the role he had played in freeing their people. Well no reason not to grease the wheels. Looking at each in turn, he willed himself to speak their native languages. All had surprised looks that only grew as they observed his apparent mastery in multiple tongues.

Terrod and Sion sat, but Richter remained standing. He had given some thought to how he would address them. He decided to maintain his customary tack of honesty and strength. Switching to the common tongue, “I am Master of a Village and a Place of Power. I need help to grow the village into something good, something to be proud of. When I came to this Kingdom I thought that only meant getting people with skills to grow the physical village, raise crops, and erect walls. I don’t believe that any longer.”

“I can give you many reasons why coming to my village is the smart thing to do, but only you can truly answer that. Only you have lived through the past years of oppression in this kingdom. Only you

know how it has affected your lives, your livelihoods, you families. Only you can make a simple decision. Do you continue to live here being forced to kneel, or do you take a chance to come with me and stand on the merits of your own skills and hard work? I make no promises for the future, but I do promise that if you come with me, we will meet it together."

Richter sat down. No one spoke for a moment, and they simply watched each other. He was pleased with what he saw. No doubt there would be more work to fully convince them, but from the nods and speculative looks on their faces, he was confident the Mist Village was about to have dozens more residents. It was good to be the king of Charisma!

They all agreed to come with him in the end, and had already spoken to their people. Richter now had dwarven smiths and crafters, elvish hunters and healers, and gnomish builders and farmers. There was even an elvish shipwright and his apprentices. Each race had a smattering of fighters and casters of various types as well. All told including families, wives, husbands and children, one hundred and eighty two souls agreed to come with him. The topic of wages came up and he interrupted them in the middle of their proposal. He refused to pay the wage they would have made in the

Kingdom, and instead promised to pay the wage their human counterparts would have made for the same work. Richter had already resolved he would not sow the seeds of discord and disharmony in the early days of his new community. He made it clear that all would be treated equally. Tears welled in several eyes at that, and the gnome freely shed a few tears and reached out to shake his hand. Richter merely nodded in response, and further told them that for the first year as they built the village he would also provide free room and board. They in turn would help to grow the village, protect it as needed and respect his position as Master of the village. He was also firm on the point that all would help each other advance their skills. Richter planned to have a skilled population that was versatile. There was no dissension.

That only left the problem of getting them out of the Kingdom. Thankfully this was not the insurmountable problem that Richter had feared it to be. Terrod had the solution. The original plan had been to smuggle the nonhumans into the Kingdom of Rione, which did not distinguish between the races in how they treated their citizens. Terrod had hired the thieves to shelter the nonhumans so they could slowly move small groups them through Rald’s Pass, the only well-traveled and safe passage through the Serrated Mountains. It was

the only direct way into Rione, as no rivers large enough to carry ships connected the two Kingdoms. Incidentally this was also why Rione had not been annexed by the Kingdom of Yves long ago.

Now that the ultimate destination was the Forest of Nadria, different possibilities were open to them. The Undine River, the apparent name of the major waterway that ran behind Law, connected to the Forest of Nadria as Richter well knew though. They could hide the nonhumans on river barges taking them past Leaf's and into the forest. From there, Richter could guide them among the forest's many tributaries until they were only a few miles from the village. He and several others would guide them through the mists and then guide them back out. The basic location of the village might be known by a few ship captains, but nothing specific would get back to anyone in the Kingdom.

Richter was acutely aware that the greatest defense of his village was its obscure location. Taking the ships to the village was the only option though. Despite his need for caution, he had not forgotten the dangers of the forest or his encounter with the troll on the way out. Taking a host of defenseless children and nonfighters over hundreds of miles of wooded terrain would be inviting slaughter. It was these very dangers that had led Terrod and the others to reject the Forest

of Nadria, or any of the other neighboring lands initially. The Silent Hills, the Whisper Woods, the Plains of Gold, all of them could be reached by river. They were all populated with monsters or hostile tribes though. It was only because Richter had found and created a safe haven that the forest was now a viable option.

It would take several days to arrange the transport, collect the families, and bribe the ship captains, but Terrod was confident he could do it. In the meantime, each of the five leaders worked with Richter to make a list of the materials they would be needed for their various professions. Some of it was minor such as seeds for planting. Other items could be made once there, nails, boards, shovels, and plows. Some would be brought with them like jewelers tools. Some had to be bought however, like the smelter components for the blacksmiths. Many of the requests were already covered during his talk with Mama. Also if he wanted livestock he would have to arrange for that to be bought. Ideally everything would be waiting to be picked up in Leaf’s Crossing. He had several hundred gold in cold currency, and the jewels he had obtained from the thieves plus the lion’s share of the jewels from the treasury. It was time to see Hafiz again. He had only gotten a few hours of sleep in the last two days though, and just the thought of all the money he was about to

spend was exhausting. He said goodnight and walked up to his room, falling into a dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER 24



Richter woke early with the dawn. He decided to leave Sion sleeping, and made his way downstairs after gathering his bag and weapons. A half asleep barmaid gave him a biscuit to break his fast. Thanking her, he grabbed one more, and walked outside, eating on the move. Bleh! This tasted like it was barely made with any lard at all! His grandmother wouldn't have fed this to the dogs! Sigh, he had so much to add to this world! On the plus side, the sky was clear. There was still moisture one the pavestones from the cool night before. Though the sun was rising two moons could still be seen low in the sky. He walked at an unhurried pace. It occurred to him that

this was one of his only moments of solitude since waking in The Land. It was, he reflected, a beautiful morning.

Hafiz's shop was still locked by when Richter arrived. A round of vigorous knocking brought a sleepy and annoyed face to the window. Holding up the biscuit bribe, Richter gave his most winning smile. Hafiz didn't seem impressed, but unlocked the door anyway. The disheveled man bowed his head, "What can your most humble servant do for you," he said, clearly irritated.

"Just how many potions of clarity could you sell per month? Each lasts a full day and gives a 25% bonus to experience."

Hafiz lifted his head, a large wolf-like smile slowly growing on his face.

Huh, thought Richter, if that's the way I look it *is* kinda creepy.

The two men haggled good naturedly for about an hour. It was clear that the negotiations were more about a shared enjoyment of the art of bargaining, than a need to one up each another. With his high Charisma and the promise of future profits, Richter ended up paying half of his gold and about a third of his remaining gem stones, but he was able to get all of the items he and Mama had come up with. He also bought enough grain and foodstuffs to ensure that his

people could eat for four to five months even without hunting. That should last them until the first crops came in. They agreed that one of Hafiz's emissaries would meet him at Leaf's Crossing with two plough horses, one bull, seven cows, ten sheep, several dozen chickens and a twenty pigs. Richter asked for some goats, but those apparently were only in the northern part of the Kingdom, and could not be obtained on short notice. Hafiz promised to arrange for delivery of several at a future point. Richter smiled thinking about goat stew, yum! He felt that he might have gone overboard with the animals, but he was a southerner! The idea of actually getting bacon and fried chicken made his mouth water. If there was one thing this world would thank him for it would be evolving dinner meat past mutton! It required another five gold to arrange transport to be waiting in Leaf for these supplies. It seemed steep, but Hafiz assured him it would cost a large amount just to convince a ship captain to let animals ride in his hull. Thinking of the smell, Richter revised his earlier opinion and acquiesced.

Hafiz, or someone he worked with, would also meet him at Leaf's Crossing at the beginning of each month. They would collect the potions and anything else Richter had to sell. They would also take any requests the fledgling village might have.

Business concluded, the two men clasped hands and parted ways. Richter was happy to see the following prompt:

Congratulations! You have reached skill level 2 in Trade. 0.5% bonus to buying and selling.

Richter walked to the Hall to see what Mama had found. He tried to use his internal map, but in just the space of a day the tent city had changed! Richter wouldn't have believed it possible, but it seemed the Grand Market was almost a living thing. Sighing, he found another urchin and gave him a few coins. Somehow the barefooted boy was able to navigate in a way that not even the Traveler's magic could match! Half an hour or so later, he emerged on the promenade and walked towards the Hall. He found Mama at the back and was early enough that the line hadn't formed yet. When she saw him she gave a few muttered directions to one of her aides, then stood and led him outside. He told her of the nonhumans that had agreed to come with him and what their professions were. She nodded and said she had several families of hunters and farmers, as well as several individuals in a variety of professions, that would happily join him. He was taken outside by one of her associates and spent the next several hours meeting the candidates. He spoke to each about nonhumans, and dismissed from consideration any who

showed issues with them. He ultimately chose another fifty seven humans. When their families were factored in, he had agreed to take in another one hundred and three people to the village. He went back inside and paid Mama her fee, five coppers per person. He was about to leave when she stopped him. “There is one more person I would like you to meet.” She grabbed one of her older associates, and stepped to the side with him. The man looked somewhat confused.

“Do you trust me Randolphus,” she asked.

“Of course, Jala,” he said in a cultured voice.

“You have been a wonderful help, and a better friend. I have been happy to help you, but you are being wasted here. This man is about to start a new village, and quite honestly has no idea what he is doing.”

“Hey,” Richter exclaimed.

“Don’t interrupt Mama,” she scolded. Turning back to Randolphus, “He is making a new community, but does not know how to handle the countless problems that will come up. I think you should go with him.”

Addressing Richter now she said, “Randolphus was the chamberlain for the late King. He faithfully managed the affairs of the castle for decades. You are lucky to have him. Now you are both strong willed and pig headed, so rather than waste anymore of my time simply say, ‘Thank you Mama!’”

Feeling like he was in third grade, Richter simply chuckled and said, “Thank you Mama,” and was quickly followed by Randolphus doing the same. With a slight smile on her face she went to sit behind her desk, saying over her shoulder, “No charge.”

Randolphus was a tall older man with a well-trimmed grey beard. His hair was long and black hanging around his head to his shoulders. He wore a grey shirt with a black vest and black pants. When they shook hands to have a more formal introduction, his grip was firm, but he did not squeeze overly hard. “I know you from the other day. Despite her good intentions I would not force myself into anyone’s service. Do you have any need of my aid?”

“If you are half as impressive as she said, I really will be lucky to have your help. Our village will be the definition of humble compared to a King’s palace, but I intend to make it something special. Will you help me?”

“It would be my pleasure, my Lord,” Randolphus replied, bowing his head.

“We will be traveling to the Forest of Nadria. What I really need right now is someone to organize all of the workers Mama has arranged. Can you get them all to Leaf’s Crossing? I will have a ship to pick them up in a week’s time give or take a few days.”

“It will be done my Lord.”

Knots of tension that Richter had not even been aware of began to unravel from his back and neck. He smiled and said, “Randy, we are going to get along great!” He turned and left with a bit of pep in his step, missing his new chamberlain’s long suffering sigh over his new sobriquet.

By the time Richter made it back out of the Grand Market more than half the day was gone and so Richter decided to check back with Sion. Entering the inn, Terrod ran up to him. “Where have you been? Nevermind! We have broken the code, or at least part of it! I know where Isabel is!”

“Where? I am ready to go with you.”

“Do you know who Count Stonuk is?”

“No, I haven’t heard anything about the nobility in the Kingdom.”

“Well he is one of the main proponents of the new laws, and a personal friend of the King. His lands are less than a day’s journey south, but he has an estate inside of the city. A friend of mine works on his estate here, helping in the kitchen. He told me that a Wood Elf fitting Isabel’s description has been seen,” Terrod’s voice caught for a second and he stopped. Then his face firmed, his eyes full with unshed tears but also a viscious anger. “She has been seen in his personal chambers. He is having a ball in three days, and then he’s leaving the city for the season. I won’t be able to get to her once he’s back in his own lands surrounded by all of his guards.”

“What about on the road? We slip into their group while they are moving, grab Isabel, and slip out when they stop,” Sion asked.

“They live too close! He would most likely leave in the morning and travel straight there without stopping. It’s completely open terrain. We won’t have a chance. In the light of day any attack will be seen miles off! And even if we succeeded, we cannot openly attack the nobility to rescue an elf. Word would get back to the King and all the nobility would be in arms. It would give the King carte blanch to enact even harsher laws against the nonhumans. The only thing stopping him now is that some of the older and more powerful nobles would not go along with it.”

“So what is the plan,” Richter asked.

“My contact can sneak us onto the estate the night of the ball. Three of us. Four max. Sion I’m sorry but you cannot come, any nonhumans would ruin the plan immediately. Once we are inside, we pose as servants. He told me that Isabel is being kept in a room attached to the count’s chambers. Each night they are brought their food by one of the servants. I will pose as the servant and go to her.” Terrod looked at Richter, “What I need, is for you to handle the guards in front of the baron’s chambers. Ideally, in a way without bloodshed, and without them being able to identify us. No matter what though, they will need to be dealt with or I won’t be able to get Isabel out.”

Richter looked back at Terrod, “I said I would help you and I will. I don’t much in the way of stealth skills though. My Imbued arrow will kill them, but you know how much noise it makes. It would alert every guard in the house!”

Terrod was nodding quickly, “I know, I know! I have thought of that! No one that we freed can come with us for the same reason that Sion needs to stay behind. Nonhumans would immediately be detained and questioned. But that doesn’t mean they don’t want to help. There are two adepts mages present, one of Dark and one of

Earth. The Dark adept has a spell that could accomplish what we need. I've already checked though. None of the humans that are part of our group have the affinity to learn Dark Magic, but I thought you might. You already seem to have multiple magics. Will you try?"

No matter what Terrod had asked, Richter would have complied. The desperation and stress in the man's voice was heartrending, "Of course Terrod. Where can I find them?"

"Come with me," he said walking towards the stairs of the inn.

At the end of the hallway on the second floor there was a small open area. A rectangular table was there with six chairs. Sunlight streamed through the window, but a light breeze came through as well making for a very pleasant climate. A dwarf, an elf and a gnome sat around the table. Richter used Analyze on each in turn.

Name: Zarr. Mountain Dwarf Level 17. Health 420. Mana 350. Stamina 320. Disposition: Friendly. *Dwarves have several subclasses that determine their specific powers. Mountain dwarves are a hardy folk that get bonuses to Constitution and Endurance each level. They have keep eyesight that gives them excellent night vision. Natural miners, it is said mountain dwarves can "smell" veins of precious metals. Increased resistance to negative physical effects. Increased affinity and resistance to Earth Magic. Mountain Dwarves*

get three points to distribute per level, and each level give +1 to Constitution and +1 to Endurance.

Name: Ulinde. High Elf Level 18. Health 310. Mana 320. Stamina 260. Disposition: Friendly. Elves have several subclasses that determine their specific powers. High elves are gifted in archery and most magical arts. They have increased resistance to magical attack. High Elves get three points to distribute per level, and each level give +1 to Intelligence and +1 to Wisdom.

Name: Quasea. Arcane Gnome Level 16. Health 150. Mana 730. Stamina 110. Disposition: Friendly. Gnomes have several subclasses that determine their specific powers. Arcane gnomes are obsessed with knowledge. Increased dodge and sneak. Gifted in magical arts. Bonus to Intelligence each level. Arcane Gnomes get three points to distribute per level, and each level gives +2 to Intelligence.

Richter greeted each in turn by their names.

Zarr looked at him sternly, “You should not use yer ability on a person without their consent lad! It’s bad manners!”

Quasea just laughed however. “Oh Zarr, stop teasing the boy. As if you wouldn’t do the same if you could!”

“Hmpff! Not really the point at all is it Q,” he replied.

The elf stepped forward and extended his hand, “Well met Richter. Thank you so much for your help in freeing our people! Terrod has told us how pivotal you were in the fight against the Night Blades. They were, unkind to our people to say the least. Though none of us were held captive in that hole, the suffering of our people still pained us! When I heard the adepts were going to meet you, I volunteered as well. I am an adept Archer and a journeyman of Light Armor, Zarr is an adept Earth Mage, and Quasea is an adept Dark Sorceress. We can increase your skills over the next three days. It should greatly increase your chances to retrieve Isabel.”

“I appreciate your offer, but I’m not sure if I could afford your expertise,” Richter said cautiously. The idea of getting more skills was an amazing temptation, but he couldn’t believe they would just help him out of the kindness of their hearts.

“We don’t require payment, but it shows wisdom that you don’t jump at the first opportunity for more power,” Quasea answered. The gnome had fair skin and long red hair that was woven into a ponytail draped over her left shoulder. She was about four feet tall and had a round, kind face. She wore a black robe belted with dark purple rope that stopped just above her knees, tied in front with an intricate knot.

She looked him in the eye with purple irises that matched her robe, but her gaze was more playful than challenging.

“I will tell you why we are helping you. We owe you a debt either for freeing our loved. I also personally know Isabel, and I would not leave her in the hands of a pig like the count. More than that however, by deciding to come with you, we have tied our fate to you. The others may not have picked up on your secret, but I am a adept of the Dark. The Dark is useful for many things, but primarily it is used to conceal. I can feel the Mark you try to hide. That coupled with what Terrod us about the “defenses” you had in place for the village, really only lead to one simple conclusion. You are the Master of a Place of Power,” the last was said as a statement.

All three looked at him, and Richter felt trapped by the weight of their attention. The five of them sat in silence gazing at one another. He did not want his abilities known broadly. He had not forgotten Hisako’s warning that his power would make him a target. Analyze had shown that all three were friendly to him though. They had also all agreed to join his community. There really didn’t seem to be much risk. He held up his left wrist and willed the Mark to appear.

“I am the Master of the Mist Village and the Power it is built on. I promise I meant everything I have said before. Everyone that comes

to my village will be treated fairly. I am, the Master though," he added forcefully. Now that Quasea had forced his hand, he decided it was best to establish the guidelines for how things would be.

The gnome only nodded. "I quite understand… my Lord Richter." She bowed her head slightly and the other two followed suit. "We did not expect anything else. That brings us to the main reason we are helping you. If we are going to make your village a home, then the more prosperous it is, and by extension you are, the better off we all will be. Though don't expect us to always instruct you for free in the future," she said with a smile and a wink.

Richter responded with a smile of his own, "Then I gladly accept you help. Where do we start?"

He spent the next three days with the three masters. The skills the Bow adept taught him were all stamina dependent, and predictably Zarr's and Quasea's skills were mana based. The spell that was necessary to the mission came from Quasea, Troubled Sleep, but required a skill level of three in Dark Magic. She also taught him two level one spells that he cast relentlessly until his Dark Magic level increased to level three. After working with the three trainers, his skills had increased and he had gained several new ones:

Congratulations! You have reached skill level 4 in Light Armor. +2% to defense of all light armor.

Congratulations! You have reached skill level 5 in Light Armor. +2% to defense of all light armor.

Congratulations! You have reached skill level 6 in Light Armor. +2% to defense of all light armor.

Congratulations! You have learned the subskill: Grace in Combat. If wearing all light armor, dodge increased by 10%. This is a subskill of Light Armor.

Congratulations! You have reached skill level 2 in Grace in Combat. Dodge increased by 11%.

Congratulations! You have reached skill level 6 in Archery. +2% bonus to aim. +2% bonus to damage.

Congratulations! You have reached skill level 7 in Archery. +2% bonus to aim. +2% bonus to damage.

Congratulations! You have learned the subskill: Double Shot. You can fire an arrow and then a second arrow with less than a second between them. Accuracy of first shot decreased by 25% and accuracy of the second shot decreased by 50%. Cost 20 stamina. This is a subskill of archery.

Congratulations! You have reached skill level 2 in Double Shot. Accuracy of first shot decreased by 24% and accuracy of the second shot decreased by 49%.

Congratulations! You have reached skill level 3 in Double Shot. Accuracy of first shot decreased by 23% and accuracy of the second shot decreased by 48%.

Congratulations! You have learned the subskill: Drill Shot. Strong focus lets you find holes in an enemy's armor. You can ignore 10% of an opponent's armor. Takes two seconds to aim. Cost 25 stamina. This is a subskill of archery.

Congratulations! You have reached skill level 2 in Drill Shot. You can ignore 11% of an opponent's armor.

Congratulations! You have learned the skill: Dark Magic. Increasing you skill will unlock more spells. It will also increase the power of your spells.

Congratulations! You have reached skill level 2 in Dark Magic. New spells are now available.

Congratulations! You have reached skill level 3 in Dark Magic. New spells are now available.

Congratulations! You have learned the spell: Night Vision! The target of this spell can see even in the deepest darkness. This is a spell of Dark Magic. Cost 5 mana. Duration: 3 hours. Range: 10 feet. Cast Time: 1 second. Cooldown: N/A.

Congratulations! You have learned the spell: Cloying Darkness! Cast a cone of thickened darkness 15 feet in length from your hand. Movement and Attack speed of targets decreased by 20%. All in area of effect will suffer from spell. Will not work in direct sunlight. This is a spell of Dark Magic. Cost 30 mana. Duration: 10 minutes. Range: 10 feet. Cast Time: 1 second. Cooldown: 5 minutes.

Congratulations! You have learned the spell: Troubled Sleep. Places your target in a restless sleep. He will be plagued by nightmares until awakening. Any attack or hostile action taken against target will awaken them. Area of effect five feet. This is a spell of Dark Magic. Cost: 50 mana. Duration: one hour. Range 15 feet. Cast time: 3 seconds. Cool down: 15 minutes.

You have reached skill level 2 in Earth Magic. New spells are now available.

Congratulations! You have learned the spell: Summon Insects: Summons a host of stinging and biting insects in a ten foot wide circle. Causes minimal damage, but impedes concentration. This is a

spell of Earth Magic. Cost: 25 mana. Duration: 5 minutes. Range 20 feet. Cast time: 1 second. Cool down: 20 minutes

Constant use and depletion of his stamina and mana earned him a +1 to Constitution, Endurance and Wisdom. Double Shot, which had seemed almost useless initially got less of a penalty as he leveled. He could see the benefit of continuing to invest in the skill if at level 50 he could fire twice as fast as another archer. Drill shot could definitely come in handy as well. Richter had asked Ulinde if Drill shot could negate all armor when the skill level was high enough. Unfortunately the answer was no. Different skills had different caps they could advance to. Drill shot, for instance, could ignore 60% of armor when maxed out at skill level 50. The armor penetration also depended on the type of arrow being used and the type of armor it was being used against. A simple iron arrow would barely harm dragon scale armor for instance, even if Drill shot was maxed. Once again reality was intruding on Richter's plans for world domination!

There was no denying the usefulness of the training. Ulinde explained that training with someone at a higher level than you in a skill would increase the speed you learned the skill. The amount of the bonus was based on the level of the trainer compared to your

respective level. Richter also asked how Ulinde could teach light armor skills, when he was only a journeyman in that skill. He looked confused for a moment until Richter talked about how he knew only adept and master magicians could teach spells. Ulinde nodded in understanding and said that didn't apply to learning new skills.

An added benefit of the training was that Sion was able to learn from Ulinde as well. He obtained the skills Grace in Combat, Double Shot and Drill Shot, but even more useful, Stun Shot. It was a level 10 archery subskill, so unfortunately Richter couldn't learn it yet.

Training had been tiring, but extremely beneficial and efficient. He definitely progressed faster than he would have alone. Richter was extremely thankful that these three were going to be part of his village. He expressed that to Quasea, and she just gave him a pinch on the butt with a saucy wink before walking off.

The gnome's forward behavior didn't hold Richter's attention long. He was day dreaming of creating a culture of open learning in the Mist Village. Knowledge was guarded jealously in The Land. The price of the books were a clear indication. One book cost three months of wages for the average worker. That wouldn't be the case in his village. Every skill that could be learned would be. Dreams of arrow shooting Dark Earth magicians were dancing through his

head. He decided to be honest with himself. Jedis. He really wanted Jedis!

The three days came and went surprisingly quickly. The only breaks Richter took from his training was to check on the progress of his new people. Both the humans and nonhumans had been industrious about organizing for passage to their new home. The human settlers, along with Randolphus, had left for Leaf's Crossing the day before. Richter had paid a coin to a messenger to run ahead and carry a message to Rosy at the Whistling Hen. It had told her that he needed to rent out the entire inn to house the human portion of his people for a day or two. He included in the message what he hoped was a sufficient amount of coins for their room and board, but promised to make up the difference in a few days if he was short.

The nonhumans had slowly ferreted their families to the Laughing Imp or other safe houses that Terrod and his compatriots had access to. It had been an emotional series of days for them as there was a very real possibility that they would not see those left behind for several years, if ever again. Terrod and Richter had decided to implement everything on the same day. The same day of the count's ball, the holds of the ships they had commissioned were slowly filled throughout the day with the nonhumans. Richter and

Sion would join them after saving Isabel. She would also come to the Forest, as it would be way too dangerous for her to remain in Law after escaping the count. Terrod would stay behind, and try to find the other nonhumans that had been sold. So far no further information had been gleaned from the ledger. Ultimately he was planning to sell the inn, and if possible make a new life in Leaf's Crossing, Isabel could join him some time later. Through his training and organizing, Richter lost track of time. Before he knew it Terrod had walked into the room at the end of the hallway where Richter was sitting with Zarr and simply said, "It's time."

CHAPTER 25



Terrod's contact in the count's household had found servants' uniforms for them to wear. Besides holding women against their will, apparently Count Stonuk was also guilty of horrible taste. His house colors were burnt orange and white. Richter felt like a creamsicle. To make it worse it wasn't just a touch of orange here and there. Instead the servants were required to wear a poncho-like outfit that made them look like the playing cards that served the Queen of Hearts in Alice in Wonderland. The only consolation was that Richter was sure everyone would be so distracted by the garish clothes, that no one would remember their faces.

Sion was not happy to be left out of the plan, but agreed to hide in a nearby alley. If all went pear shaped, he could cover their retreat. The noise from a well imbued arrow strike should scare anyone, and might give them precious moments to escape.

The infiltration party was composed only of Richter, Terrod and Jeremy. Apparently the window to enter the count's home was extremely short, and any more people would cause a problem. Richter wore his armor under the clothes, any buckles wadded so as not to make noise and betray their disguise. Getting into the count's house was actually surprisingly easy. The party meant a large amount of deliveries and movement. The three picked up an order the head of the kitchen had made at a local bakery, and then walked in through the back gate. The guard only checked their baskets of bread against a list of suspected deliveries, then barked at them to move along.

Richter was somewhat surprised, but then he realized that it was no different than any large upscale party in his world. This was just the house of a rich guy not some secret government bunker. After all, who would challenge a noble who had his own private army, and could kill them with zero consequences? Guess just three bad mofos like us, Richter thought with a smile.

They walked in, and delivered the bread to the kitchen. Terrod's contact turned out to be a nondescript man of middling height and brown hair. He barely acknowledged Richter or Jeremy. Terrod had told them about the huge risk the man was taking, and they all agreed not to engage him or try to exchange names. They had timed their entrance to coincide with when the food was brought up to the count's room. It minimized their risk of being discovered as frauds.

Terrod picked up a plate of food, and walked up the stairs. Richter and Jeremy followed discretely behind. When he got to the room, the guards merely waved him through, apparently well used to the count's captives being fed at this time. He missed half a step when one guard made an off color comment about the girl having more than enough to eat when the count returned. Richter thought Terrod might kill the jerk, but he thankfully stuck with the plan and entered the room. As soon as he was inside, Richter started counting. The plan was to get to a hundred count, and then cast the spell. Jeremy was keeping lookout on the stairs one floor down. The greatest weakness in the plan was that there was no one to watch the far end of the hall. If anyone came from that direction while Richter was casting Troubled Sleep upon the guards, the jig was up.

He counted silently and at ninety seven began to cast the spell. As he was counting he realized that he had never discussed with Terrod if the count to one hundred was when he could exit or when Richter was supposed to cast the spell. It would be horrible for them all to be killed for such a stupid mistake. Go on ‘three’ or ‘one, two, three then go’ was one of the biggest flaws in guy communication. Even though sleep spells were lethal weapons as they allowed for a coup de grace, the entire plan would fall apart if Terrod exited before the guards were knocked out.

Peaking around the corner to see the two guards, Richter focused his will and cast the spell, the necessary words and hand movements coming unbidden, but flawlessly executed. The guard closest to him slumped as soon as Richter finished casting the spell. The other reached out a hand to brace himself against the wall, though. He strained to straighten his legs, and his mouth opened to shout, but after a second more, he collapsed next to the other one.

Richter ran forward, knocking twice on the door. Terrod opened the door and grabbed one of the guards under the arms, dragging him into the room. Richter did the same with the other guard. The entire process including the spell took fifteen seconds. Jeremy came in behind him, and they closed the door. The two of them began to

strip the guards. A brown haired beauty with haunted eyes held onto Terrod for a second with frantic strength. He murmured in her ear and then stared into her eyes. She nodded her head and released him, but Richter noticed her hands were still shaking.

The livery of the guards was similar to the uniform of the servants, but of course they were also wearing armor. Luckily it was not plate, or there was no way they would have gotten it off in a reasonable amount of time. Each guard was wearing a chainmail shirt, chainmail coif and a kettle helm. They each had swords and kite shields as well. Richter tried to slow his breathing as he focused on his task. He cast Haste on the three of them hoping to save precious minutes. He grimaced slightly at the loss of the mana, almost half of his total. He hated to waste it, but if there was a fight on the way out he would want his mana higher. He took a mana potion. His mana bar increased quickly forty points over six seconds.

After several minutes, each guard had been stripped and Terrod and Jeremy were wearing their armor and weapons. They would of course not pass a close inspection, but from a distance they looked like any other two guards. It had been decided Richter would not pose as a guard on the way out because his Wood Sprite armor was superior to anything his colleagues had. He had lost the bonus to

having the complete set on unfortunately, having had to remove the helm, gauntlets and shoes as they could not be concealed in his disguise as servant. They tied up the actual guards, shoving gags in their mouths. The spell was supposed to last an hour, but one had shown some resistance so who knew how long he would actually be out. Richter stood up and took in his surroundings.

The room was opulent to say the least. Paintings and tapestries covered the stone walls. A round table of almost black wood was off to the left side of the room with four upholstered chairs, each with intricate stitching. A canopied bed that could easily fit 10 people was against the back wall, the sheets rumpled and hanging off the side of the bed. A large fireplace was resting cold against one wall.

The most fascinating thing in the room was the woman they had come to save. Isabel was about five feet eight inches tall. Her hair was loose around her shoulders and hung well past her shoulders. Her skin was the dusky brown of the Wood Elves. It had the appearance of a black base that had been painted over with chestnut in a way he had associated with Indians he knew back home. A tight fitting gown didn’t hide hips that were neither narrow nor wide, a slender waist and small firm breasts. What arrested him was her eyes though. Her irises were gold like wheat seen on a

cloudless day in midsummer. Those same beautiful eyes were bloodshot and sorrow filled. They convinced him of one thing. He would kill the count if he ever had the opportunity.

Terrod was holding her again, and her grip seemed even tighter than before. Richter waited a few seconds, not wanting to disturb the comfort this woman was clearly seeking from her loved one, but ultimately had to. He couldn't ignore their precarious position for long. Clearing his throat he said, "Terrod. Terrod we have to get her dressed, and get out of here."

The man made eye contact with Richter, his gaze initially furious that anyone would take him away from comforting his lost love even for a moment, but he came back to himself, and nodded, separating from the woman again. Turning his back to give her privacy, Richter looked out at the wealth in the room. Turning to Jeremy he said, "You move very quietly my friend. Am I correct to assume that you have a, *cough* nontraditional way of earning a living."

The man stared at him for a moment before chuckling, "You might be safe to assume that. Why?"

Giving a ruthless smile, Richter replied, "Because in the next few minutes we are going to rob this bastard blind."

They rummaged through a small chest at the foot of the bed, finding a pouch of coins and several daggers. In one nightstand, he found more coins, and a small blue wand about a foot and a half long with a white jewel the size of a robin's egg at the end held in place by a stylized claw. More basic items were present, and Richter didn't leave anything behind, sweeping everything into his bag. He cleared the expensive flatware, plates and goblets from the table. For good measure, he opened the closet and shoved all of the clothes and shoes he found there into his Bag of Holding. He thought again that the Bag was worth at least twice what he had paid for it. Whatever he shoved in, the Bag remained flat on the outside. He took his glass dagger to the edge of the framed paintings, cut them loose, and rolled them up along with the rest of the stolen loot. That was when he saw Jeremy looking intently into the cubby of the other nightstand.

A focused look was on the other man's face, and he was reaching inside the top drawer. Searching for a moment, he seemed to press something. The side of the night stand popped open revealing a hidden cubby. The metal door of a safe was seen built into the night stand.

“Damn! I could open this, but we don’t have the time,” Jeremy angrily shook his head.

“Wait,” Richter told him. “Let me try something.”

Richter placed his hand on the safe and invoked his Dungeon ring. He gave a delighted smile when he heard a click. He pulled open the safe and saw it was full of jewels, papers and, what was this? It looked like the count’s signet ring. With an evil smile, Richter placed it in his bag thinking the good count would love knowing his ring would help to feed the nonhumans he had been prosecuting. Gesturing to the jewels, he looked at Jeremy who smiled and nodded his head. The man swept half the gems up and placed them in his pouch. He left the rest for Richter.

“We are ready,” Terrod called. He was wiping tears from Isabel’s face and telling her to be brave. “We need to go.”

Richter shoved the rest of the jewels and the papers into his bag and stood. The four of them mentally prepared themselves, and then Richter stepped out into the hall. Seeing that it was still empty, he waved his companions forward and they walked down the hall. The hardest part was remaining calm, and keeping an unhurried pace. To know how difficult it was imagine having to pee really bad and also

walking away from a growling dog. It was nerve racking, and yet still they couldn’t show it.

Despite the stress of the situation, they made their way along the servant corridors with no issues. The most dangerous part of the scenario was behind them, and they walked to the side gate that they had used to enter the estate. The two guards were still there, but no one else was currently around. Not wanting to take any chances, Richter cast Troubled Sleep, and both slumped to the ground. They then just walked out.

They met Sion in the nearby alley and ditched the livery of the count. Pausing only to retrieve his bow and don the rest of his armor, they were quickly away. Jeremy doffed the guard’s armor saying it slowed him down too much. Richter shoved it into his bag, waste not want not. They picked up the pace alternating between a walk and a jog down the dark alleys of the capital. Nearing the harbor, they turned down a wide street that exposed them to the light of the full moon. Which was the only reason that they saw the man standing in the middle of the street.

“Impressive! That wasn’t a bad bit of crime you did there! Coming from me you should take that as a compliment. All of you! Terrod, inn keeper of the Laughing Imp, Jeremy, former cut throat of

the Lawbreakers, Isabel, the lovely Wood Elf, Sion, the Wood Sprite, and Richter, the unknown man.” He smiled broadly.

“How do you know us?” Terrod shouted.

“You are absolutely right! I am being rude,” the man replied sounding genteel and magnanimous. “Please allow me to introduce myself. My name is Ronin, and I am the leader of the Night Blades. You may remember that you killed almost all of my new members, and burned my house to the ground a few nights ago. Now it has been a hard few days for me and mine. We lost a few more members to attrition and other thieve guilds that smelled blood in the water. It also took a few days to figure out who to thank for the, ahem, warm welcome, I was greeted to when I came back to my home. Then I remembered who we had sold those pretty little nonhumans too though. So I checked up on anyone in their lives.” The man gave a short laugh. “Now we couldn’t be sure which one would be rescued, or exactly who would come, but somehow I had a feeling this little elf maid would stir someone’s heart.” He laughed again, and ugliness could clearly be heard in the sound.

“Where are the rest of the people you sold,” screamed Isabel.

“Be calm Isabel! Be calm,” the friendly note was back in his voice. “Don’t be so rude. After all, my friends and I have worked so

hard to repay all of you for the kindness you showed us.” His voice lowered with each following word, the tone of his communication weighed heavily with anger and scorn. “I NEED, to settle, this DEBT!”

Richter heard a faint scuff on the cobblestones behind them, and realized the purpose of Ronin’s entire speech had been to stall. It had allowed the other thieves to find and catch up with them. To come up behind them! Throwing his arm back he cast Grease, and was rewarded with cursing coming from multiple spots as thieves came into view, their Stealth interrupted by the fall.

He turned back and cast Analyze on this man who would face down four armed men alone, even if only as a delaying tactic.

Name: Ronin. Human Level 22. Health 400. Mana 160. Stamina 310. Disposition: Hatred. Humans are one of the shortest lived, but most prolific breeders in the Land. Humans have a broader affinity for skills than other races. No special bonuses to race, but no special penalties as well. Profession: Thief.

What?!? This man had a Profession! Xuetrix had said that only the powerful had Professions. And this Ronin was level 22! This could not bode well!

Sion drew and fired at Ronin, but the man leaned almost leisurely to the side and disappeared from sight. Terrod pushed Isabel against a wall, and turned to draw his sword protecting her. Jeremy activated Stealth and vanished as well.

Richter began to cast Troubled Sleep, but was struck with a spear of rock. The attack made his Ice Dagger look like a tooth pick. The one strike removed thirty health, striking him in the side and knocking him down. Praying he had a second before being struck again he cast Haste. His power with Air Magic let him quickly get back to his feet.

When he stood up, he saw the mage off to the right with a black wand pointed at him, purple light gathering at the tip. Sion shot an imbued strike at mage which stopped a good three feet short, causing ripples in cylinder of force around him. The wizard changed his target and pointed the wand at Sion. A purple sphere shot out from the end of the wand. Sion had started moving as soon as he saw the wizard aiming his wand. The tennis ball sized purple ball struck the cobblestones right next to Sion. When it struck it popped and spread a thick purple liquid over the stones, which began to bubble and hiss. A small gobbet landed on Sion’s leg. The sprite

screamed in pain. He quickly dragged his leg on the street scraping off the viscious acid.

Richter could see the flash of bodies and blades in front of him, Jeremy and Ronin disappearing and reappearing quickly, fighting as only stealthed figures could. They must be guessing where the other would be in a fast paced and close range game of cat and mouse. It was impressive that Jeremy had lasted even a few moments against a level 22 Thief! Who knew what benefits the profession brought!

The rogues behind him were rolling out of the radius of the grease spell to rejoin the fight. Knowing they would be swarmed if the men got up, Richter reached into his quiver and found the Arrow of Flame. He shot it at one thieves in oil. The thief gave a grunt of pain that became squeals of agony when the arrow ignited the oil he had conveniently been rolling around in. The fire spread through the rest of the oil and ignited two other thieves, three others managed to escape the oil though, and were quickly getting to their feet. He shouted to Terrod, “Get her out of here! The longer we wait, the more of them will come! We have to get escape!”

Sion had recovered quickly and continued to fire shots at the mage, dodging rocky spikes and acid balls in return. Not of the arrows were able to penetrate the barrier. Richter fired an imbued

arrow at a thief still trying to get up, and struck him in the chest. It knocked the man back into the flames of the grease fire, his screams joining the others. Luckily the flames formed a makeshift wall, and gave him some respite from the other two thieves, but still a thrown knife grazed his temple putting blood into his right eye.

Terrod was moving down the street with Isabel. The docks were in sight, but were still several hundred yards away. Richter cast summon insects on the mage, but the bugs remained on the outside of the cylinder of protection the man had made. He tried using Drill shot, but again his arrow failed to have any effect. The mage just smirked at him and then turned his full attention back to Sion.

Then Richter heard a gurgle. He turned to the right and saw Jeremy and Ronin phase into view. A knife was sticking of Jeremy's throat, Jeremy's own blade was in Ronin's side. The two stood face to face. Jeremy's wound was clearly fatal, while Ronin's was most likely damaging, but not life threatening or even debilitating. Sion meanwhile had been caught by a half arc of stalagmites that appeared in front of the mage sticking outward and upward. On leg was impaled on a sharp rocky spike. The purple light was accumulating at the end of the mage's wand again. Richter barely looked as he drew and fired again.

The man was completely ignoring him. Richter could only assume the mage had deemed him a nonthreat. The thief had a sick grin on his face as he anticipated Sion's death. Richter felt a brutal pleasure at seeing the shock on the man's face as the Arrow of Negation penetrated the circle of protection, and pierced the mage's high right chest. Richter drew, imbued and release again, the arrow aimed at the man's face. The mage snarled at him while yanking a necklace off and cracking it in his hand. Each of the attackers were enveloped in black smoke and a moment later they were gone. A furious scream of "No," came from Richter's right. His last glimpse of Ronin was an insane and furious expression on the man's face just before the Thief disappeared.

It was suddenly quiet, even the still screaming and burning thieves had disappeared. Richter's already released shot exploded against the wall that the mage had been standing in front of only an instant before. Jeremy's body crumpled to the ground, a scarlet bright arc of blood coming from the hole that Ronin's blade had left in his neck.

It was over. The earth mage's escape amulet had taken his entire surviving party away, leaving behind only Richter, Sion, Jeremy and the dead. Richter ran over to Jeremy attempting to

stabilize the old thief. The blood had already stopped spurting though, now only dribbling out in weaker and weaker pulses. The dying man smiled weakly, blood on his teeth, and then his eyes glazed over and he released his last breath. With nothing else to be done, Richter was overcome with emotion he didn't have time to express. He got up and hobbled over to Sion the pain in his side making his breath come out in short huffs. He gave Sion a healing potion and a healing herb. He also placed the healing ring in his friend's hand.

Richter looked the sprite in the eye and said, "I'll pull on three okay? One," and without further warning yanked him off of the rock that had impaled him. Sion screamed, glared and then spit at Richter in as many seconds, and then promptly lost consciousness. Luckily the potion was still working for a few seconds slowing the blood loss down. Passed out, Sion could not use the ring to fully stop the bleeding, so Richter ripped a strip off of his clothes and bound the wound.

Furious with anger and exhausted from the brief but fierce exchange, Richter picked up the sprite and looked at Jeremy's body. He couldn't just leave it there. He was reaching down to throw it over his shoulder when Terrod came running back. Terrod just said, "No,"

softly when he saw Jeremy's body. He walked over to his old friend and picked up the body, freeing Richter to carry Sion. They moved as quickly as possible down to the dock. The shouts of the crew of the ships they had hired could clearly be heard. They ran aboard one of the ships as the sailors pushed the boat away from dock. They were finally out of immediate danger, but it had been at a high cost.

You have completed the Quest: Fight for those Who Cannot II. Reward: Increased regard from Terrod. Reward: 8000 XP

Congratulations! Your relationship with your Terrod has improved from friendly to ally. Terrod will fight with you, and for you until death, and if he can find a way back through the veil, will fight for you again.

TRING!

You have reached level 10! Through hard work you have moved forward along your path. As a Chaos Seed you gain 6 points to distribute to characteristics instead of the usual 4. You also get 25% advancement to the skill of your choice! Crush your enemies, honor your allies, LIVE!

You have either characteristic points or skill percentage points to allocate from the previous level. Now that you have progressed

again, you must allocate your points within the next week or they will randomly be assigned for you.

Richter dismissed the prompts. As wonderful as it was to level, the gravity of the events that had just occurred made it impossible to be happy. Terrod was still holding Jeremy's blood stained body.

"Terrod," Richter said. "You know you can't stay in the Kingdom. Ronin survived, and if he knows who you are, there is a good chance the count, and by extension the king, will know as well. You aren't safe here."

The stress gave Terrod's visage a bleak and stark look. He simply nodded without speaking.

"I would be proud and happy to have you join us in the Mist Village. As long as I live you will have a home there."

The man broke, a sob escaping him. The enormity of the past few days, the horrors that the woman he loved had suffered, and the loss of his good friend and his home was enough to faze anyone. He didn't allow his moment of vulnerability to continue though. He carefully set down his friend's body on the ship deck, and he and Richter clasped wrists, each man leaning on the strength of the other.

“Thank you my friend. I gladly accept your offer. I will return to help the other nonhumans if we can discover their location, though.”

You have been offered a Quest: Fight for those who Cannot III. You have helped many nonhumans, but some still languish in slavery. Terrod is dedicated to saving them. Will you help these people to breathe free air again? Reward: Unknown. Yes or No?

“I will stand with you Terrod. If we can help them, we will.”

Terrod the human has become your Companion. Companions will stay with you only as long your goals align.

Terrod looked at him with a surprised expression. “I had heard of Companions but I’ve never known any, let alone thought I would become one.”

“I am happy to have you as one,” Richter replied. The reward for the quest made more sense now. Richter had thought that when Terrod’s disposition changed from neutral to friendly, that was the extent of it. The real benefit though was that finishing the quest set the stage to gain another Companion! “Sion and I have been Companions from the beginning, but I’m still not sure what it means,” Richter said.

“Companions are devoted to one another’s cause. As time progresses you can sense when the other is in danger, and with enough time and devotion to each other, you can sense intense emotions. There are stories of the greatest Companions being able to share one another’s strengths and mana even Abilities, but I think that is only fantasy.”

Hmmm, Richter thought, having Companions was potentially a way to greatly increase one’s strength. What if Sion could adopt his Limitless Ability? There was a lot to think about. Terrod begged off after that, moving to comfort Isabel.

Once the boat was far enough from the dock, the sailors unfurled the sails. Both ships were moving with the current and quickly picked up speed. Less than an hour later, the lights of Law could no longer be seen, and they were at last on their way home. The sailors had wrapped Jeremy’s body in a tarp and taken it below deck. They would bury him in the village. Richter sat next to Sion, who had awoken and used the healing ring. As the boat rocked gently, they leaned against the mast, staring out at the darkness over the water.

CHAPTER 26



They linked with the other two boats in Leaf's Crossing, carrying the human settlers, supplies and livestock. Rosy met them at the docks. Richter thanked her and pressed a few more coins into her hand. There was no difficulty or trouble in either arriving at or leaving the town. Not surprising as their speed on the river had considerably shorted the trip time between Law and Leaf's Crossing. While a scout on a fast horse might have made the same time, the count very likely didn't know who had made off with his property yet. Even if he had, it would take a large force considerably longer to gather and oppose them. The bigger fear would be if an attack ship had pursued them, but Terrod said they were not many of them. The

royal fleet was comprised more of transport ships to move soldiers quickly among the numerous waterways. Luckily, they continued on after Leaf's Crossing unmolested.

Richter decided to invest four of his new characteristic points into Intelligence, and another two into Wisdom. He needed a greater capacity for mana usage. The 50% from level nine and ten he invested into Archery. It was his most advanced skill, and seemed like the best way to get a lot of bang for his buck.

A day after leaving Leaf's Crossing, they entered the forest, and five days after that, they reached the mist. Richter had spoken with all the ships captains and warned them of the mist's confusing properties. He had split his Companions, and Randolphus among the four ships, giving each immunity from the swirling grey vapors in the air around them. Though they had to move slowly, they were able to navigate the river with each helmsman listening to the four.

A monotone voice greeted him as the village came into view, "Welcome back my Lord."

Chuckling lightly, Richter replied, "Hello Futen. I missed your pretty face."

The orb just pulsed slowly without replying.

The Mist Workers had apparently been busy. The trench was now a good twenty feet deep and thirty feet wide. Trees had been cleared from the areas surrounding the village leaving a potential killing ground if ever they were attacked. Large stacks of white stone were piled, alongside large mounds of iron ore. Several pyramidal piles of logs had been made with dozens of trees each as well. The loose rocks and debris within the ruined walls had all been removed. The village had been turned into an RTS gamer's wet dream.

That actually wasn't quite right, he reflected. Richter had vast plans for his new home. What he was looking at was closer to the foundation for a grand strategy. The kind of wonderfully beautiful morass that could devour your personal life for days or weeks at a time. Either way it was a blank slate with plenty of resources! Richter shook his head. It had not been easy, and had involved travel, pain, blood and loss, but he was finally ready to start making his new world. To begin the Founding of his own Kingdom.

A small ceremony was held for Jeremy. His body was burned on a pyre. All of the nonhumans gathered to show respect to the man who had died for their freedom. That night several deer were roasted, and a small feast was held. Terrod told humorous stories

about his old friend to the laughter of many. He later told Richter that Jeremy would have appreciated being remembered like this.

It took a couple days to unload everything from the ships. Once everything was removed, Richter, Sion, Terrod and Randolphus guided the ships back out of the mist. Richter arranged for one ship to come back to this point in about a month's time. He needed a quick way to get back to Leaf's Crossing to bring his trade goods. Hopefully he would have his own boat soon, but until then the cost of paying for transport was worth shortening the weeks long trip to only a few days. It was also considerably less dangerous on the waterways then hiking through the forest.

They made the ten mile hike back to the village on foot. Richter had been somewhat concerned that Randy wouldn't be able to keep us, but he kept pace with no difficulty. The weather was thankfully not too cold as spring was just starting. The higher altitude did make a colder temperature than in Law, and the nearby mountains didn't help, but it was only slightly uncomfortable, not dangerous. The primary task everyone focused on was making shelters. The readily available resources made the task go quickly though. While it was being constructed, all two hundred and ninety souls stayed

underground. It was not exactly comfortable with that many people, but it was safe and dry.

Randolphus, or Randy, as Richter insisted on calling him to his clear frustration, showed his value immediately. He organized having a latrine dug, hunting parties, creating guard rotations and assigning countless necessary tasks that Richter would not have thought of. The hunters were also given immunity from the mists, but only after each had been spoken too and vetted by Richter again personally. While it would be difficult for a traitor to lead someone back to the village, he didn't want to take the risk unnecessarily. Granting everyone immunity now was premature. He did roll the mists back a full mile from the center of the village though to make it easier to move around. The farmers were also eager to cultivate the lush soil outside of the city wall. They began preparing the land for planting with guards along the periphery to protect against animal, or god forbid, monster attacks.

The dwarves were massively excited about having access to relatively untouched land and several disappeared on the first day into the hills north of the city exploring tunnels and caves. As far as Richter was concerned, the forge was the next priority construction after shelter. According to the dwarves, a tavern was a close third.

Apparently a few dozen casks of ale had been packed on the ships as “essential” supplies.

The first building was finished in little over a week. It resembled a meeting hall more than a house. It was two hundred feet long and seventy feet wide. Each log had been denuded by stripping the bark. The bark hadn’t gone to waste though as it was rendered down to make a rudimentary tar. The builders had strewn gravel along the ground from the quarry stones to protect from the damp. Overtop the gravel, they had placed logs sawn in half longitudinally to make a crude floor a few inches above the ground. The walls had been erected in only a few days, but the roof took twice as long. It would have taken even longer, but the high strength and nearly endless stamina of the Mist Workers had saved considerable time. Two rudimentary fireplaces had been built at either. The large room that resulted was dry and more importantly warm at night. Everyone’s mood improved drastically once everyone had more space to spread out in. Richter knew that for a fact.

You have constructed your first building! Shelter is one of the basic necessities of survival. Your people require more than just the bare essentials, however. Though they have not complained, tensions were getting tight, and morale would have suffered if they had

suffered cramped conditions for much longer. Morale increased by 50. Further information regarding morale can be found on village interface.

I have got to spend some time looking at that interface, Richter thought. He resolved to do it soon.

Once the shelter was finished, the frantic pace slowed down a bit. Initially everyone had worked almost feverishly from sunup to sundown to make the village livable. Sion had even take charge of the kids to see which had an affinity for herb lore, and surprisingly most did. The smell of drying herbs and ingredients became commonplace in the caverns that had all been sharing as a living space. A welcome surprise was that the lake in the hills above the village held many rare herbs, according to Sion.

Richter had initially been concerned that there might be a problem with the humans and nonhumans working together, but his worries came to nothing. Everyone seemed happy to apply themselves to honest work, unhindered by unjust laws. His new people walked around with smiles on their faces.

There were many things to be done. Quests to be completed. Enemies to be stopped. People to be rescued. Items to be identified, and weapons to forged. He also had an appointment to keep in

Leaf's Crossing in about five weeks as arranged with Hafiz. That meant they needed to collect the Potions of Clarity. Richter couldn't wait for more adventure! He would be lying though, if he said he wasn't a bit tired. It was, he decided, time for a short vacation before everything got crazy again. When he discussed it with Sion, his friend whole heartedly agreed.

The next morning they left for the Hearth Tree. Both of their armors had taken a beating in the past several weeks, and the smiths in the village said they could not fully repair them as they were completed with sprite magic. Sion assured him that Hisako would be able to restore their armaments to full strength, though she might give them an earful about being more careful as well. It seemed like a fair trade to Richter. Both of them were missing the tough diminutive woman. Richter left Terrod in charge with Randolphus as his capable aid. Richter stressed that he wanted construction started on a ship as soon as possible.

They decided to take a relaxed pace, speaking little, nearly retracing their initial journey that seemed so long ago. Encountering nothing more dangerous than a deer, they simply enjoyed the peace of the Forest. It was a balm to both of them. It felt like coming home. After several days, they were greeted with the sight of the Hearth

Tree surrounded by the sea of golden grass. As always, Hisako seemed to know they approaching, and was waiting at the boundary of the golden grasses.

“Be welcome at the Hearth Tree, Richter of the Mist Village,” she said with a warm smile. “And welcome home my son, I see you have grown in strength, hopefully in wisdom as well,” the last said with a wry arch of her eyebrow.

“Thank you mother. Yes, I have learned much, and found a good friend and ally,” Sion replied with a smile.

Richter walked forward and took her hand, “Hearth Mother, thank you. Sion is more than a friend to me, he is like a brother. There is no way I could have accomplished what I have accomplished without him. I formally extend the friendship and welcome of the Mist Village to you and your people. I sincerely hope that you will ask me for any help that you might need.”

A serious look came over her face, “I was hoping you would say that. There have been small camps of goblins and bugbears seen in the forest between here and the Fire Tip Mountains to the east. They are slaughtering all of the local wildlife and despoiling the Forest. We need to clear them out and learn why they are making inroads into the Forest. I will not stand by and watch the Forest of Nadria become

like the Whisper Woods, overrun with evil creatures. The Forest *will* be protected, no matter how many battles it takes. Will you help?”

You have been offered a Quest: Protect the Forest I. Bugbears and goblins have invaded the forest, and are disrupting nature’s balance. The Hearth Mother is asking your help. You must destroy an enemy camp. Optional: Find out why the invaders are coming into the Forest. Reward: Unknown. Yes or No?

Richter looked at Sion, “Ready to take out some more bad guys?”

Sion looked back with that blood thirsty grin of his, “Oh yes, brother! That’s what we do!”

Thank you all for reading! I really hope that this story and my characters find a resonance within you. “The Land: Forging” will be coming soon! Peace, love, and the perfect margarita!

Aleron

Name: Richter
Age: 24
Level: 10, 11%
Health: 290 Mana: 250 Stamina: 170
Strength: 15
Agility: 17
Dexterity: 30
Constitution: 17
Endurance: 17
Intelligence: 23
Wisdom: 21
Charisma: 21
Luck: 14
Abilities:
- **Limitless**
- **Gift of Tongues**
- **Winds of Change**

Skills:
- **Herb Lore Lvl 4; 25% to next level, 100% affinity**
- **Potions Lvl 1; 0% to next level, 100% affinity**
- **Analyze Lvl 5; 17% to next level, 100% affinity**
- **Stealth Lvl 4 76% to next level, 100% affinity**
- **Archery Lvl 7; 78% to next level, 100% affinity**
  - **Imbue Arrow Lvl 4; 94% to next level, 100% affinity**
  - **Focus Lvl 2; 60% to next level, 100% affinity**
  - **Double Shot Lvl 3; 20% to next level, 100% affinity**
  - **Drill Shot Lvl 2; 28% to next level, 100% affinity**
- **Swordsmanship Lvl 1; 88% to next level, 100% affinity**
- **Small Blades Lvl 1; 11% to next level, 100% affinity**
- **Unarmed Combat Lvl 1; 10% to next level, 100% affinity**
  - **Pressure Points Lvl 1; 15% to next level, 100% affinity**
- **Light Armor Lvl 6; 59% to next level, 100% affinity**
  - **Grace in Combat Lvl 2; 42% to next level, 100% affinity**
- **Air Magic Lvl 3; 51% to next level, 100% affinity**
- **Life Magic Lvl 1; 49% to next level, 100% affinity**
- **Earth Magic Lvl 2; 98% to next level, 100% affinity**
- **Water Magic Lvl 1; 19% to next level, 100% affinity**
- **Dark Magic Lvl 3; 31% to next level, 100% affinity**
- **Map Making Lvl MAX**
- **Trade Lvl 2; 27% to next level, 100% affinity**

Marks:
- **Master of Mist Village**

Resistances:
- **Air 50%**
- **Mental 15%**

Spiritual 15%
Race: Human (Chaos Seed)
Reputation: Lvl 2 “I think I know that guy!”
Alignment: Neutral
Language: All

Richter's Spells

Barkskin: This spell will increase natural armor by +2. This is a spell of Earth Magic. Cost 20 mana. Duration: 20 min. Range: self. Cast Time: 1 second. Cooldown: N/A.

Summon Insects: Summons a host of stinging and biting insects in a ten foot wide circle. Causes minimal damage, but impedes concentration. This is a spell of Earth Magic. Duration: 5 minutes. Range 20 feet. Cast time: 1 second. Cool down: 20 minutes

Grease: This spell will make a 10x10 foot area slick greatly increasing chance of anyone in the area falling down. This is a spell of Earth Magic. Cost 15 mana. Duration: 5 min. Range 25 feet. Cast time: 2 seconds. Cooldown: 10 min.

Ice Dagger: This spell will throw a dagger made of ice at your target. This is a spell of Water Magic. Cost 20 mana. Duration: 1 min. Range: 40 feet. Cast Time: 1 second. Cooldown: N/A.

Haste: This spell will increase the speed of the target. This is a spell of Air Magic. Cost 25 mana. Duration: 10 min. Range: 5 feet. Cast Time: 1 second. Cooldown: N/A.]

Errant Wind: Increase the dodge of your party to projectiles. This spell will only work when you are outside. This is a spell of Air Magic. Cost 50 mana. Duration: 20 min. Range: 50. Cast Time: 4 seconds. Cooldown: 45 min.

Charm: You can convince an enemy that they are your friend. In battle they will fight for you. Casting this upon a creature lowers they regard for you after the spell wears off. This is a spell of Illusion Magic. Cost 60 mana. Duration: 1 hour. Range: 20 feet. Cast Time: 1 second. Cooldown: 10 minutes.

Night Vision: You can see even in the deepest darkness. This is a spell of Dark Magic. Cost 5 mana. Duration: 3 hours. Range: 10 feet. Cast Time: 1 second. Cooldown: N/A.

Cloying Darkness: Cast a cone of thickened darkness from your hand. Movement and Attack speed of targets decreased by 20%. All in area of effect will suffer from spell. Will not work in direct sunlight. This is a spell of Dark Magic. Cost 30 mana. Duration: 10 minutes. Range: 10 feet. Cast Time: 1 second. Cooldown: 5 minutes.

Troubled Sleep: Places your target in a restless sleep. He will be plagued by nightmares until awakening. Any attack or hostile action taken against target will awaken them. Area of effect five feet. This is

a spell of Dark Magic. Cost: 50 mana. Duration: one hour. Range 15 feet. Cast time: 3 seconds. Cool down: 15 minutes.

